

# KAVVANA





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DIRECTING THE HEART  
IN JEWISH PRAYER

SETH KADISH



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This book is lovingly dedicated to my parents, Dr. Harold Kadish and Joan Kadish. You have been my personal models of *mentchlikhkeit*, and of commitment and love for family, community, and Judaism. May God grant you many more years of health and prosperity, and may you merit seeing your children and your children's children involved in Torah study, mitzvot, and acts of kindness.

*He has told you, O man, what is good,  
And what the Lord requires of you:  
Only to do justice  
And to love kindness,  
And to walk modestly with your God.*

—Micah 6:8





# Contents

Dedication	v
Acknowledgments	xi
Preface	xv
Topic	xv
Purpose and Method	xix
Non-Traditional Innovations in Prayer	xxiii
"Side Issues" for Traditional Jews	xxv
 <b>PART I</b>	
<i>Kavvana</i> for Prayer in Jewish Law	1
 1 INTRODUCTION—THE AGE-OLD PROBLEM OF ROTE PRAYER	3
A Problem Both Ancient and Modern	4
Definitions of <i>Keva</i> and <i>Tahanun</i>	12
Preliminary Questions	16
 2 PRAYER WITHOUT <i>KAVVANA</i>	18
Rabbi Eliezer's Rule on <i>Kavvana</i>	18
<i>Kavvana</i> in the Bible	21
Limitations on Rabbi Eliezer's Rule	23
A Reinterpretation of <i>Kavvana</i>	27
Rabbi Eliezer's Rule is Neutralized in Practice	29
Some Contemporary Applications	30
The Formal Preservation of Prayer	33
 <b>PART II</b>	
<i>Kavvana</i> for Prayer in Jewish Thought	43

<b>3</b>	<b>WHAT IS PRAYER AND HOW DOES IT MAKE SENSE?</b>	<b>45</b>
	Introduction	45
	What does "Prayer" Include?	46
	Problems and Paradoxes: Does Prayer Make Sense?	53
<b>4</b>	<b>GOD AND MAN IN SIMPLE PRAYER</b>	<b>61</b>
	Biblical Prayer: The "Social Analogy"	61
	Rabbinic Prayer: The "Social Analogy" for a Nation	78
	"Futile" Prayer: The Beginnings of a Problem	91
	Rational Criticism of the "Social Analogy" (with a Response)	99
<b>5</b>	<b>GOING BEYOND SIMPLE PRAYER: RATIONALISM AND MYSTICISM</b>	<b>108</b>
	Bahya and Albo: Prayer as Religious Self-Training	108
	Halevi versus Rambam: Does Prayer Fulfil a Religious Ideal?	126
	From Philosophy to Kabbala	146
	Some Remarks on Kabbalistic Prayer	154
	Some Remarks on Hasidic and <i>Mitnaggedic</i> Prayer	164
<b>6</b>	<b>RATIONAL PRAYER IN MODERN TIMES</b>	<b>179</b>
	The Nineteenth Century	179
	Rational Prayer from the Text in <i>Siddur Iyyun Tefilla</i>	180
	Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch: Extreme Rational Prayer	185
	Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kuk: Prayer as the Elevation of Desire	189
	Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik and the Anthropological Paradox	194
	Man May Not Pray without the Halakha	201
	Prayer as Need Awareness	209
	Some Implications of the Rav's Views	216
	The Problematics of Prayer: A Short Review	222
<b>7</b>	<b>KAVVANA FOR PRAYER IN JEWISH THOUGHT: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS</b>	<b>227</b>
	Putting It All Together	227
	Pluses and Minuses	235
	Learning from All of the Approaches	242
	A Personal Statement on "Simple" Prayer and Theodicy	244
<b>PART III</b>		
	<b><i>Kavvana</i> and the <i>Siddur</i></b>	<b>255</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>PRAYER AS A FIXED TEXT</b>	<b>257</b>
	Introduction	257
	An "Official Text" of the Prayers: The Problem	258
	The Debate Among Modern Scholars	259
	Basis of the Rabbinic Debate	266
	Rabbinic Deniers of an "Official Text" for Prayer	274
	Rabbinic Believers in an "Official Text"	278
	Other Rabbinic Believers in an "Official Text": Mystics	281

An Halakhic Compromise	294
A Summary of the Views on an "Official Text" for Prayer	296
Informal Prayer in Judaism	298
Technical Note on Adding Petitions	300
<b>9 RABBI RAMBAM ON PRAYER AS A FIXED TEXT</b>	<b>305</b>
Introduction	305
Creation of the Official Text	306
How Did Rambam Know?	308
Changing the Text	310
Prayer in Translation	313
The Fixed Text in Rambam's Correspondence	316
Rambam's Prayer Text	317
Conclusion: Two Valid Ways to Read the Rabbinic Sources	320
<b>10 IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRENT SCHOLARSHIP: AN AFTERWORD</b>	<b>323</b>
Swinging the Pendulum Back	323
Prayer in the Early Synagogue?	326
Rabbinic Prayer as a Fresh and One-Time Creation	332
Two Valid Views Once Again	340
<b>11 THE TRIUMPH OF THE FIXED PRAYER-BOOK AND ITS RAMIFICATIONS FOR MEANINGFUL PRAYER</b>	<b>344</b>
Rambam on Prayer and the Hebrew Language	344
Increasing Standardization	348
Scribes, Publishers, and Praying the "Right" Way	348
The Reaction to Reform	349
Kabbala	350
Implications of the Fixed Prayer-Book for Meaningful Prayer	350
Conclusion	357
<b>PART IV</b>	
<b>Practical Suggestions for <i>Kavvana</i></b>	<b>359</b>
<b>12 MAKING PRAYER A TRUE CONVERSATION WITH GOD</b>	<b>361</b>
Prayer as Conversation	361
A Working Definition of " <i>Kavvana</i> "	362
Reintroduce Individual Expression	367
Don't "Say All the Words"!	370
Monotones	381
The Case of <i>Hazarat ha-Shatz</i>	387
Music and Poetry in Prayer: Positive and Negative Factors	394
New Liturgy	408
Implications for Women's Prayer Groups	409
Implications for a "Unified" Israeli <i>Nosah</i>	410
A Summary of Practical Techniques for <i>Kavvana</i>	411
Conclusion	420

<b>Additional Readings on Prayer</b>	422
Reading 1 Saadya Gaon on Prayer ( <i>Emunot ve-De'ot</i> )	423
Reading 2 Rabbenu Bahya Ibn Pakuda on Prayer ( <i>Hovot ha-Levavot</i> )	427
Reading 3 Rabbi Yehuda Halevi on Prayer ( <i>Kuzari</i> )	445
Reading 4 Rambam on Prayer ( <i>Moreh ha-Nevukhim</i> )	461
Reading 5 Rabbi Hasdai Crescas on Prayer ( <i>Or Hashem</i> )	485
Reading 6 Rabbi Yosef Albo on Prayer ( <i>Sefer ha-Ikkarim</i> )	492
Reading 7 Maharal of Prague on Prayer ( <i>Netiv ha-Avoda</i> )	526
Reading 8 Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira on Prayer ( <i>Hovat ha-Talmidim</i> )	550
Reading 9 The Many Possible Meanings of "Kavvana" (David R. Blumenthal)	562
Glossary of Hebrew Terms, Rabbinic Works, and Authorities	566
The History and Philosophy of Prayer: Explanatory Bibliography	591
Index	597





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The translation of biblical verses in the book is mostly based on *Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), but I modified their translations whenever the context warranted it.

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## *Preface*

### TOPIC

Anyone who walks into a well-stocked Jewish library or bookstore immediately realizes that a huge amount of printed material is all devoted to one purpose: introducing people to the prayer book or the synagogue service and serving as a practical guide to the experience of Jewish prayer. The variety of books and pamphlets (plus, more recently, recorded material) available on this one topic is astonishing. There are children's texts and workbooks on prayer and synagogue customs; explanatory guides for adults of almost every religious or ideological persuasion; commentaries on the siddur (again, from a variety of perspectives and on numerous levels); explanations of prayer according to mysticism, philosophy, and popular psychology; histories of Jewish prayer; encyclopedias (!) of Jewish prayer; and musical guides to prayer. It goes without saying that hundreds of editions of the siddur are currently in print, and dozens of them include a variety of unique features beyond the Hebrew text itself. Additionally, there is an extraordinary amount of overlap within each of these categories: new books on these same topics appear every year with no acknowledgement of the fact that what each one covers has already been covered more than once before.

This phenomenon, to my mind, is ample proof that many people who feel a connection to their Jewish roots want to understand prayer better, but continue to feel that they lack such understanding. Despite all the explanatory aids they are offered, Jews still continue to feel alienated when it comes to actually praying, and this is why new materials are constantly being produced in renewed attempts to overcome the problem. Most are devoted to overcoming the numerous "technical" difficulties confronting a person who wants to appreciate Jewish prayer, and by doing so they play an important role. Admittedly, the most outstanding "technical" problem has always been that many Jews simply do not understand the Hebrew language; the most important explanatory aids always have been, and

always will be, new and better translations of the siddur. But the fact that a huge variety of Hebrew guides to prayer are published in Israel is ample testimony to the fact that even after the language barrier is overcome, other equally significant barriers remain. Even for those who know Hebrew, guides to the literary structure of the siddur and to the hundreds of synagogue customs and their reasons are still necessary. The problem is not simply the language barrier.

All of the aforementioned books tend to assume that the lack of meaning in most people's prayer usually derives from a lack of knowledge and training. They presume that people who are more familiar with synagogue prayers will automatically find more meaning in them. Their assumption, which is actually quite an optimistic one, is that well-written and skilfully-presented explanations should be able to overcome the barriers to meaningful prayer for most Jews.

There is a much smaller group of books, however, that acknowledges a much deeper problem: It is a fact that even knowledgeable Jews who are intimately familiar with the *mechanics* of prayer, who have no trouble whatsoever understanding the siddur, still usually feel "left out" or distant when they pray. How so? Their own feelings when they pray are completely divorced from the words they say to God. I am not talking about people who consciously disagree with some of the sentiments expressed in the siddur, but about those who simply find that their hearts are not in their prayers. In the words of the classic definition of rote prayer, their "mouths and their hearts are not the same." They say the words and can understand what the text means if and when they happen to think about it, but they are usually not moved in any special way by what they say. In fact, they rarely pay any attention whatsoever to what they say to God when they pray. This problem of rote, mechanical prayer affects the greatest Torah scholars no less than Jews of "simple faith."

While the popular guides to Jewish prayer described above are valuable, they do not even begin to address this fundamental problem underlying prayer, which is far more serious than unfamiliarity with Jewish customs or the Hebrew language. This deeper issue affects all Jews: those who are deeply knowledgeable no less than those who are not. Jews with weaker backgrounds in Hebrew or in Torah study face a double problem, because they must overcome their basic lack of training as well. But even for them, it is the deeper problem of rote recitation that will ultimately be the most serious obstacle to meaningful prayer they will face. The barriers of language or lack of knowledge can be overcome, especially since there is halakhic mandate for an individual to pray in the language that he speaks. But the problems of rote prayer have proven tenacious for almost all Jews throughout history. Whether or not a Jew understands the daily prayers he says, they are usually rushed rote recitation.

The books addressing this particular problem cover a large spectrum, though their number is admittedly much smaller than that of the guides to prayer, which are aimed at a larger audience. Some of them represent the approaches of specific hasidic groups; hasidism is well-known for its historic role in strengthening the personal meaning of prayer. Other such books are

written by the products of non-hasidic yeshivot, and usually emphasize the deeper meanings to be found "between the lines" of the siddur through careful reading and study, as well as the important *halakhot* of prayer. (There is only a narrow difference between this last group of books and formal commentaries on the siddur.) Yet others are written by individuals with unique philosophical bents, each incorporating his own outlook into his particular approach to prayer. All such books attempt to bring *kavvana*, or "meaning," back into a person's prayer, each in its own way.

But one common failing of all these books is that each advocates one particular approach to *kavvana*, without addressing any others. There is no acknowledgement of the diversity of approaches to prayer and *kavvana*, each of which must face the problems of rote recitation in its own special way. The authors of these books are reluctant to admit that just as the problem of rote prayer affects people from all walks of life with many different dispositions, the possible solutions are also numerous and the choice to be made from among them must be a very personal one.

One sensitive reader, who reviewed some books of the type being described here, noticed how one of them simply overlooked the explicit diversity in approaches to prayer among the very sources that it drew from:

If a person were discussing this subject with me, he would feel constrained to discuss the emotional conflicts raised by the section on *Kavanah*. "One should never forget that recounting God's praises is meaningful only when the words are heartfelt and sincere." (p. 47) Fifteen pages earlier we learned that "the standard prayer text . . . is so powerful that even when the supplicant fails to pray with proper intent, feeling and understanding, his words still have a great impact on the world." (p. 33)<sup>1</sup>

The implicit contradiction between the two passages quoted by the reviewer should indeed cause "emotional conflicts" for anyone who prays, because there is simply no way to fully reconcile the two opposing sentiments she quotes here. Unfortunately, books written for popular consumption like the one quoted here (and even some works of scholarship) tend to lump these two opposing views of prayer together, never consciously acknowledging that they derive from two radically different worldviews with incompatible approaches to prayer. (We will trace the origin of each of these two views later in this book.) An author's personal desire to reveal what he considers the single "true" approach to Jewish prayer is often so strong that he inadvertently reads his own views into all of the classical sources and quotes them in one vein, contradictory though they may be in reality. But such a vague, homogeneous explanation of

1. Nama Frenkel, "Book Reviews," *Jewish Action* 55, no.3 (spring 1995):52-53. The book being reviewed, from which the two quotations are taken, is Avrohom Chaim Feuer, *Shemoneh Esrei: The Amidah / The Eighteen Blessings* (New York: Mesorah, 1990).

prayer cannot help people to pray deeply, because it gives them no true understanding of what they are trying to accomplish.

Surprisingly, the extraordinary historical career of rote prayer is rarely acknowledged in popular books on Jewish prayer. Most of these books implicitly suggest that rote prayer is much more severe today than it was in the past: i.e., that it is a “modern” problem. But an objective reading of the sources shows the opposite to be true, that rote prayer has been a severe problem from the very beginnings of Jewish prayer. (Please note: The almost complete lack of *kavvana* for prayer among Jews throughout most of Jewish history is not an exaggeration. It is fully attested to in the standard halakhic literature, as we shall see in the early chapters of this book.) The dilemma of how to insure that prayer would be characterized by *kavvana* (rather than the lack thereof) has always been *the* central problem for Jewish prayer, not just a “side issue.”

Even worse, there is something crucial that is rarely mentioned in any popular book about the deeper “meaning” of prayer. While most such books reiterate the halakhic demand for *kavvana* in prayer, they invariably do so as an *exhortation*. The point is continually that the pray-er must make greater efforts to concentrate, that any lack of *kavvana* is due to a regrettable lack of effort or, at best, to unavoidable human frailties. Rarely is it suggested that the almost complete lack of *kavvana* among the overwhelming majority of Jews who pray has something to do with the rigid format of Jewish prayer. On the contrary, these books usually take great pains to sanctify that rigidity. To the best of my knowledge, not one of them has ever questioned the assertion that the halakha indeed requires (or at least prefers) confining prayer to an exact, prescribed text. This book will show that in reality, the dominant halakhic view actually *denies* that rigidly prescribed texts are necessary, and this for reasons directly linked to the problem of achieving *kavvana*.

In the course of studying and teaching about prayer, it became clear to me how important these last few points are. It is only by acknowledging that, in significant ways, the very structure of Jewish prayer actually works *against kavvana* that we can develop working strategies to address such a fundamental problem. It is only by making this admission, and at the same time seriously investigating that structure, that we will be able to appreciate the vital reasons why prayer is so completely structured, *despite* the fact that this often works against *kavvana*. Only then can we honestly find ways to aid *kavvana* from within the halakhic form of prayer, difficult though it may be.

Similarly, we humble ourselves when we realize the true age and scope of the rote-prayer problem, by acknowledging that even the greatest Jews have confronted it with very limited success since the beginning of our history, despite endless exhortations to *kavvana*. This realization need not deter us from looking for solutions, but it should help us feel more comfortable with partial solutions and approaches to the problem that, while they won't guarantee total success in achieving *kavvana*, will at least help us to limit rote prayer to a degree in keeping with our innate human limitations. We should also try to be open-minded as we look for such



solutions, instead of simply adopting one view or definition of *kavvana* in prayer. We should do our best to understand *all* of the various philosophies of prayer available within the Jewish tradition on their own terms without confusing them (as we mentioned above), and to draw on any that can offer insights to help us deal with the central problem of rote prayer.

## PURPOSE AND METHOD

In short, this book is meant to encourage serious analysis of the place of *kavvana* for prayer in halakhic Judaism, drawing on primary sources from the fields of halakha, Jewish philosophy, and Jewish history. More than anything else it is meant to be informative and thought-provoking: the source texts and analysis are presented in a crisp, clear, and provocative way to facilitate understanding and to stimulate critical thought. In other words, these essays are designed to promote the mitzva of Torah study on a challenging level by examining the critical topic of meaning in prayer thoughtfully, but in an exciting format. Most of this book derives from what were originally informal discussions and lectures, and in it I try to preserve some of the flavor of an oral presentation rather than writing a completely formal essay. (Thus the anecdotes and informal “chatty” comments.) Though the topics addressed in this book are sometimes complex (this is especially true for Parts II and III, on the philosophy of prayer and the history of the siddur), no attempt has been made to oversimplify the problems it addresses at the expense of their profundity. But all the issues discussed in this book (even the hard ones) are fascinating in their own right and have direct relevance to our lives as religious Jews: the time and effort spent in studying about them will be its own reward. Rather than presenting them on a superficial level, I have sought to present them in all of their subtlety and complexity, but in a way that is readable and edifying for all.

I have tried hard to make these studies not only thorough and challenging, but also readable and clear. The text is written simply enough for anyone to read, though some familiarity with yeshiva “learning” will inevitably help to make the source texts, interpretations, and arguments clearer and easier to follow. There are frequent summaries and clarifications, especially at the end of chapters and units dealing with the most complicated material. The central theme of this book is rote versus meaning in Jewish prayer, and as you read you will probably be as surprised as I was that the issue is a great deal more complicated and controversial than it initially seems, even for practicing religious Jews. I have attempted to provide all the necessary background knowledge and references for a well-informed conversation (or debate) on the topic.

Most of the primary material quoted in these pages is culled from the work and thoughts of others, especially the great rabbinic minds from the era of the Talmud through the Middle Ages. The analysis and criticism of these primary sources is the work of scholars, all from recent centuries, but from two very different “worlds” of study: the first being the world of the

traditional *beit midrash* where Torah is studied out of love as the will of God and using traditional methods of interpretation, while the second is the academic world of scholars who teach in the departments of Jewish studies at various universities (especially in Israel). As is well known, the relationship between these two worlds has often been fraught with friction. But I am fortunate that my personal experiences have allowed me to develop a cautious yet basically positive attitude towards both of them, one which allows these two worlds of study to complement each other in many ways. This attitude grew out of my years of contact with unique people, mostly at Yeshiva University, who are at once outstanding *talmidei hakhamim*, exceptional academic scholars, and deeply religious Jews. They showed me that despite widespread notions to the contrary, most of what goes on in academic Jewish scholarship is *not* inimical to fundamental Jewish beliefs. Modern scholarship has the potential to enrich our understanding of Torah far more often than it challenges our fundamental beliefs, though it cannot be denied that it sometimes does the latter. Even when such conflicts do arise they usually derive from underlying attitudes which influence the direction of an overall approach to a problem, rather than from clearly established evidence or facts.

I will be candid: Some of the views of academic scholars cited in this book are troubling for religiously observant Jews, including myself. One of the most important parts of a religious Jew's fundamental outlook must be a profound respect for the intellectual honesty and the moral integrity of Hazal, and a couple of the sources and opinions quoted here treat that integrity lightly. But these views must be answered directly, not ignored! When one is confident about his own fundamental positions he can consider what others think without fear, even those whose basic assumptions and attitudes differ radically from his own. And in the case of academic Jewish studies it is important to be able to do so, because of the contributions that it can offer towards a better understanding of the halakhic and philosophical opinions of the greatest rabbinic authorities. Conversely, much light can also be shed on modern academic theories and debates when closer attention is paid to the millennia of consideration given to precisely the same issues by traditional Jews. It is my hope that, as a side benefit, this book will help promote an awareness of how the results achieved by each of these methods of study can enrich our understanding of the other, to the benefit of all Jews who value the study of God's Torah.

As I said, most of the factual material and analysis in this book has already been discovered by others, whether in the world of yeshiva study or in academic Jewish research. I do not pretend to have created an entirely new thesis in any chapter of this book. Most of the source texts presented here have been discussed numerous times in scholarly articles and books, but never before presented in a clear and compelling manner that can make them valuable for the hundreds of thousands (perhaps millions?) of Jews who pray every day. My contribution has been to collect and organize this wide range of material, much of it obscure not only for the average reader but even to *talmidei hakhamim*, explain it in a straightforward way, and

show the implications of each source or idea for the conflict between rote and meaning in prayer.

However, I have included some *hiddushim* (new contributions) of my own as well. I have not hesitated to take issue with the conclusions of others where I feel it is warranted, nor have I avoided drawing new conclusions from old material. In addition, the presentation of many of these sources in the particular context of this book adds a new dimension to them. I hope, therefore, that even Torah scholars who have previously studied the issue of *kavvana* in prayer will still find some useful new ideas in this book.

In some areas I was forced to add my own research and ideas because the extant scholarship is inadequate or just plain wrong. For instance, modern scholarship has ceaselessly debated the historical question of whether or not there was ever one original, official text of the rabbinic blessings. I initially thought that no stone could possibly have been left unturned in this endless debate, but to my great surprise one major area remained entirely untouched: the intellectual history of the question in the classical Jewish sources. The material on "Prayer as a Fixed Text" (Part III, chapter eight) explodes a basic misconception that is shared by traditional Torah scholars and academic scholars of Judaica alike, namely that the prevalent view among the *rishonim* (medieval halakhists) was that prayer texts of the rabbinic blessings were rigidly prescribed, with little or no room for Jews to express themselves to God in their own words. Among traditional Torah scholars this is usually taken as an axiom. In academic scholarship the prevalent view is that while the rabbinic blessings were not rigid texts originally, the post-talmudic halakhists viewed them as rigid. The relevant chapters in this book will show that this is simply not the case, that the dominant halakhic opinions after the Talmud did not think an "official" or "binding" text was part of halakhic prayer. This point may seem academic to some readers, but it is actually of concrete practical importance for Jews who pray. The reason is that views on the origin of the siddur by the likes of academic scholars such as Ismar Elbogen and Joseph Heinemann may be interesting, but most Jews who actually pray every day are far more concerned about what Rashba and Ritva had to say about the very same issue, and rightfully so. The latter are part and parcel of the halakhic process while the former are not. The views of modern-day academic scholars become much more relevant to actual religious practice when it is realized that the *rishonim* arrived at the same conclusions, by and large, centuries before them.

These points about the history of Jewish prayer are perhaps the most prominent area in which this book covers new ground. As I said above, this book's main purpose is not to discover new things, but to uncover the religious implications of things that are already known, at least to scholars. Nevertheless, there are other areas with new contributions as well. For instance, the place of prayer in Jewish philosophy and thought has not gone unnoticed in the past, but it has certainly been neglected. Individual aspects of the problem have been considered in depth, but others have been ignored. The place of prayer in Jewish thought has rarely been viewed in a

comprehensive way, as a variety of reactions to one basic set of problems. Thus, a number of the questions and answers in this book about the philosophic positions of great Jewish thinkers on prayer are entirely new. And finally, the long and troublesome historical career of *kavvana* in prayer (or the lack thereof), without which the history of Jewish prayer is entirely meaningless, has mostly been ignored. The few articles dealing with it do not come close to addressing its true scope. I have tried to rectify this injustice in the early chapters of this book. All in all, whether we speak of the halakhic obligation of *kavvana*, or the philosophy of prayer, or the history of Jewish prayer as a fixed text, I hope that even learned Jews will find new and useful contributions here.

As I mentioned, this book attempts to present a thorough discussion of rote versus meaning in prayer, a topic that by its very nature is wide-ranging. Such thoroughness is accomplished (without injury to clarity) through the notes, which are designed as guides to further study. Besides identifying sources, they also tell what kinds of information, arguments, descriptions, or conclusions the reader is likely to encounter upon examining each source, and also how that author's work relates to the conceptual structure of this book. In many cases, the notes discuss interpretations by others that oppose the conclusions I have reached in the text, and I defend my approach. Unlike the main text of the book, which was written with all intelligent readers in mind, the references and discussions in the notes sometimes presume a good background in yeshiva study or a command of spoken modern Hebrew. Therefore, I suggest that those with limited backgrounds in Jewish studies limit themselves to the main text for a first reading, and explore the notes later. In the book's main text, the only Hebrew terms used as a matter of course are those basic to the theme of halakhic prayer, such as: *tefilla/tefillot* (prayer/s), *mitpallel* (which I sometimes used instead of the cumbersome "person who prays" or the awkward "pray-er"), *kavvana* (sincerity or devotion during prayer), *nosah* (text of the siddur), *sheli'ah tzibbur* (prayer-leader), *posek/posekim* (halakhic decisor/s), etc. The system of transliteration is a functional compromise between my preferences and the needs of the publisher. As a rule I explain each Hebrew word or phrase when it first occurs, sometimes more than once. An explanatory Glossary is included at the end of the book.

In general, I quote whole sections of the source texts (rather than just small snippets) so that the reader can get a better feel for studying the original texts in context. This feature also makes the studies more useful for teachers who may wish to present the original texts to yeshiva high school students or to Torah study groups for adults.\*

Finally, I must mention something about how this book took shape. I

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\*Please note that clear and readable Hebrew source sheets covering the references in this book are available for those who want to study these chapters more thoroughly, or use them as the basis for courses in Jewish high schools and adult Torah study programs. Simply mail me a request. As of this book's publication, requests can be mailed to 100 Mohawk Drive, West Hartford, CT 06117, and they

was not privileged to work on it in an academic environment conducive to writing and research. Rather, I began reading and writing about *tefilla* out of private interest shortly after I left Yeshiva University to enter the frenzied world of *hinnukh* (Jewish education) as a beginning teacher with a full-time schedule. Most of the reading, writing, and reflection involved in this book was done during “stolen” moments after long days of teaching and preparing classes. (Although teaching Torah to adolescents is often very rewarding, those who work in the field know it has little connection to research or writing books in its day-to-day reality.) Furthermore, I had infrequent and inadequate access to the excellent Judaica libraries in New York City. This slowed progress on the book tremendously, and forced me to make ceaseless revisions as I slowly procured the primary and secondary literature on the topic, texts which would have been in easy access from the very beginning under better conditions. As a matter of fact, these revisions continued right up to the date of publication. But despite the obstacles, I still did everything I could to make this book thorough, complete, and intellectually sound. Therefore, I ask readers who find important sources that I inadvertently missed in this book, or who note mistaken arguments or misinterpretations, to keep the verse which asks “Who can avoid errors?” (Psalms 19:13) in mind, and let me know about their ideas personally. I would be glad to correspond with readers who take issue with the ideas in this book, or who simply want to explore them in greater depth.

## NON-TRADITIONAL INNOVATIONS IN PRAYER

Some readers may be surprised that in a book such as this, little mention is made of innovations in non-traditional synagogue services. The main reason I have disregarded them is my firm belief that halakha is the will of God for the Jewish people. I do not mean that halakhic formalities are all there is to Judaism: on the contrary, this book will show that halakha itself takes deeper religious meaning (specifically, *kavvana* for prayer) fully into account. Nor do I mean that halakha is an system of black-and-white, absolute rules without subtlety or complexity. The exact opposite is true, as will become clear when we learn how different aspects of the *halakhot* of prayer were emphasized in varying degrees and in very different ways throughout history, in order for prayer to conform to different philosophies and attitudes. What I do mean is that God obligates us to study halakha from *all* possible perspectives as we attempt to understand His Will to the best of our ability. Such halakhic study must be done with a deep sense of humility and a sincere commitment to complete honesty.

Prayer, like any other area of a Jew's life, is also an area governed by halakha. In parts of this book I criticize the practical realities of daily prayer in the lives of many observant Jews (including myself), but my point is not

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to do away with elements of halakhic prayer and offer “reforms” in their place. On the contrary! My point is that fixed prayer by many Jews who *think* that their prayer fulfils a halakhic obligation actually does *not* live up to the expectations of halakhic prayer when *kavvana* and personal expression are absent. In other words, in this book we will examine why the *ideals* of halakhic prayer are so distant from its actual *reality*, and then try to find how those ideals might be better achieved. Clearly, non-halakhic innovations have no relevance to such a discussion.

But there is also a more subtle reason for not discussing non-halakhic innovations: I am not at all convinced that these innovations really get to the “guts” of the problem of rote versus meaning in *tefilla*. *Siddurim* published by non-Orthodox movements are usually altered because of certain objections to ideas expressed in the traditional text (e.g., references to Israel as the “chosen people,” or, more recently, the feminist objection to referring to God with masculine pronouns). But as Joseph Heinemann, the renowned expert on Jewish liturgy, accurately pointed out, the major problem with *tefilla* is *not* that praying Jews *disagree* with the sentiments of the prayers, but that their prayers become a rote activity even when they *do* agree with them. It is not the *content* of our prayers that is most troubling, but the *attitude* with which they are said when we agree with what they mean. This problem, and it alone, is the theme of this book.

Overall, the confrontation with prayer by non-traditional Jews has been on a superficial level. In fact, it has more truly been a confrontation with *the text of the siddur* (as well as with certain synagogue customs and laws) than with *the concept of prayer*. There is much debate on how the *content* of the siddur should be changed, but no questioning of the need to rely on a printed siddur so completely in the first place! Much thought is given to how much Hebrew should be retained in a synagogue service, which prayers may be shortened or omitted, the inclusion of new textual and musical compositions, the role of women in public prayer, and how to make synagogue services more “relevant” generally. But one finds little discussion (especially among congregants) about what it really means to talk directly to God, or what emotional attitude one should have towards Him, or what sorts of things one should say to Him. If a non-traditional Jewish movement is serious about re-examining prayer and making it “relevant” to modern Jews, then these are the types of questions it should be asking.

Instead, these movements have mostly focused on printing new editions of the prayer-book and on the practical problem of how to help their congregants learn to function during services. These are not unworthy goals; but by focusing on such technicalities, non-Orthodox movements show that they often do nothing more than tinker with old religious forms (in this case, the siddur), seldom confronting other, much-deeper religious issues.

One final reason for only including traditional material here is that this book addresses the problems of regular daily prayer *as part of an entire lifestyle and mindset* centered around Torah study, mitzvot, and serving God. There are a few rare exceptions, but the unfortunate reality is that the liberal Jewish movements have mostly failed to create “praying communi-

ties" where prayer and blessings (among other mitzvot) are an important part of the daily lives of the Jews who belong to their synagogues. Therefore, the central problem this book addresses is mostly relevant to traditional Jews alone.

Having said all this, there is still a great deal that non-traditional Jews can gain from these studies, despite that the problem they address is one of traditional religious observance. As a serious exercise in studying the classic sources of Jewish law and philosophy, this book is something that all Jews who care about their roots can learn from. More specifically, by studying the serious age-old problem of rote prayer as it confronted traditional Jews throughout the millennia, even those who do not accept the authority of halakhic prayer can still gain valuable perspectives for their own programs. This is especially true today, when many non-traditional synagogues are adopting elements of traditional Jewish practice. As they do so, such institutions will have to confront the danger that their synagogue services will involve rote recitation as well.

## "SIDE ISSUES" FOR TRADITIONAL JEWS

In a similar vein, it is not the purpose of this book to address the various ideological or philosophical problems that confront *traditional* Jews when they read the siddur.

Many deeply religious, observant Jews today have difficulty with the idea of animal sacrifice, which is a major theme in many prayers (and which Reform Judaism expunged from the siddur early in its historical career). Others object to attitudes towards women expressed in the siddur. I do not belittle any of these issues, and I think each of them (and others like them) should be dealt with seriously in its own right. But I also think that all such issues have been and continue to be dealt with sensitively and thoughtfully by spokesmen who operate from *within* the halakhic tradition. The writings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kuk, for instance, address serious concerns about animal sacrifice with sensitivity and depth.<sup>2</sup>

However, as I said before in the name of Joseph Heinemann, all of these specific problems are only peripheral issues when it comes to prayer. They

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2. For beginners, the best way to start studying this central topic is to read the superb double-introduction to the reasons for the sacrifices, and the following essays on *Vayikra* and *Tzav*, as found in Nehama Liebowitz, *New Studies on Vayikra*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Torah Education Department, 1993). Supplement this with the insightful chapter "Al Ta'amei ha-Korbanot" in David Tzvi Hoffmann's commentary on *Sefer Vayikra*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kuk, 1964), pp. 59–68.

For Rav Kuk's important views on the topic of animal sacrifice (and eating meat in general), see "Al ha-Mitnaggedim le-Korbanot" in *Afikim ba-Negev*, reprinted in *Otzerot ha-Re'iyah*, ed. Moshe Tzuril (Jerusalem, 1988?), pp. 754–756; "Talelei Orot: Hashkafa on Ta'amei ha-Mitzvot," *Tahkemoni* (1910), reprinted in *Ma'amarei ha-Re'iyah* (Jerusalem, 1984), pp. 18–20; and *Hazon ha-Tzimhonut v'ha-Shalom* (Jerusalem, no date).

are *not* the main problem Jews who pray experience with *tefilla*, and they are not the topic of this book.

In short, *Kavvana: Directing the Heart in Jewish Prayer* is not meant to deal with the specifics of prayer or the text of the siddur, but with the major malady in Jewish prayer: lack of *kavvana*. This book is *not* a commentary on the prayers, though by reading it you will appreciate some important ones more deeply. It is *not* a guide to the siddur, but through it you will understand the prayer-book and where it came from in surprising new ways. It examines some *halakhot* of prayer in great detail, but it is *not* a code of Jewish laws on prayer. It surveys the position of prayer in rational philosophy and mysticism, but it is *not* a treatise on the Jewish philosophy of prayer. It is *not* a history of Jewish prayer, though it discusses crucial historical issues. Rather, the aim of this book is to explore the age-old tension between rote and meaning in Jewish prayer from each relevant perspective—halakha, philosophy, and history—leaving no stone unturned as we try to understand why prayer so often fails to be meaningful. Only after this has been accomplished can we reasonably attempt to craft a well-thought-out and useful approach to solving the problem.





# Kavvana *for Prayer in Jewish Law*



## *Introduction: The Age-Old Problem of Rote Prayer*

An acquaintance of mine was hired by a successful corporation. He was very excited about his new job, not only because it would be lucrative, but also because his new boss had a reputation for being fair and easy to work with. The boss was also known to cultivate warm, friendly relationships with his employees.

Not long after my friend began working, his boss asked him if they could arrange a time to meet socially. So the fellow invited his boss to his home for dinner the next week to meet his family. As soon as he came home that night he ordered his wife and children to start setting things up for the boss's visit. He made sure that his wife would stay home that day to shop, prepare dinner, and straighten up the house. (Obviously, his conception of the marriage relationship was somewhat outdated.) He also began giving orders to his children: one was to mow the lawn, another to vacuum, another to clean out the garage. Everything had to be perfect when his boss arrived for dinner.

On the night of the dinner, however, the fellow decided to leave everything to his wife and children. He himself left to spend the evening with some friends who had bought tickets to a basketball game! When the boss arrived, the man's wife had no good way to explain why her husband was gone. The boss was furious (despite the wonderful dinner that was ready to be served) and fired the man on the spot.

As some readers may have guessed from the beginning, the above story is really a parable. The person in the story could be myself or almost any Jew, male or female, young or old, Sephardic or Ashkenazic, who has ever attempted to say the daily prayers found in the siddur with regularity. The *ba'al ha-bayit* (master of the house) within each of us is our mind, and when we pray it gives orders to the other parts of our bodies. It tells the eyes to scan the text of the siddur, the tongue and lips to pronounce the words, the spine to hold us up straight for the *Amida* and bend when it is time to bow, and the hands to hold the siddur. Though I personally do not, others find that swaying ("shuckling") helps them concentrate better during prayer: for these people their hips are also involved in the action when they pray. And,

of course, our feet step back and forth three times before and after the *Amida*. All these parts of the body follow orders given by the mind during prayer, and they usually do their jobs well. But if one's conscious mind is not concerned with the prayers he is saying, and the only ideas in his head are about business, friends, or a basketball game, then neither the words produced by his lips and tongue nor the other movements of his body have any meaning to God.

## A PROBLEM BOTH ANCIENT AND MODERN

The parable above is not my invention. It actually dates back over 900 years to Spain, in the middle of the eleventh century. (I have modernized some of the details, but nothing more.) Here is how Rabbenu Bahya Ibn Pakuda first told the story in his *Hovot ha-Levavot*:

Any time one prays with his tongue but his heart is occupied with matters unrelated to the prayer, his prayer will be like a body without a soul, or like a shell with no kernel inside. . . .

This has been compared to a servant whose master was his guest. He charged his wife and the members of his household to serve the master and to attend to his needs, while he left to occupy himself with pleasures and games. He didn't honor his master himself, nor did he serve him with grandeur as befitted him, and as he himself was supposed to do. The members of his household neglected to do even a fraction of what was necessary for his master, because of his absence. His master was furious with him and didn't accept his service, and pushed everything back at him. Similarly one who prays: If the ideas of the prayer are absent from his mind and his thoughts, then God, blessed is He, accepts neither the "prayer" of his limbs nor the movement of his tongue.<sup>1</sup>

1. *Sha'ar Heshbon ha-Nefesh* 3 (no. 9). Based on Yosef Kafih's Hebrew translation from the original Judeo-Arabic, *Torat Hovot ha-Levavot* (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1984), p. 246.

I must give credit to the source for my idea of retelling Rabbenu Bahya's parable in modern terms as I did above. The great hasidic teacher and leader Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira of Piaseczno (may God avenge his blood), who was murdered by the Nazis in the Warsaw ghetto, wrote that "We must be very careful to tell a parable correctly as if it really happened. Because the way of a child is that even though he knows it's only a fable, nevertheless when he listens to it he sees the entire story in his imagination as if it were really happening and is excited and stimulated by it more than by what it stands for in real-life." *Hovot ha-Talmidim* (Tel Aviv: Piaseczno Hasidim, 1992), p. 28. In other words, the entire reason we tell a parable in the first place rather than explain its meaning in a straightforward manner is that it serves to draw the listener in and make him feel more involved. Therefore, we use the parable more effectively as a teaching tool by telling it in such a way that people will really want to listen to it. I have found that this is often just as important for adults as for children.

It is evident that Rabbenu Bahya considered rote prayer to be a serious problem for Jews during his time. But the problem was prevalent long before the eleventh century. Hazal (the rabbis of talmudic times), who instituted the fixed, obligatory tefillot, continually emphasized that such prayer has no value without *kavvanat ha-lev* ("directing the heart," or sincerity). Yet they were fully aware that despite their demands for concentration during prayer, it was usually not forthcoming in the average prayer of most Jews. Nine centuries before Rabbenu Bahya, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah expressed his sorrow for the condition of the Jewish people under Roman oppression after the destruction of the Temple. His comment also reveals his disappointment about the sense of prayer among Jews in his time (*Eruvin* 64b-65a):

I could exempt the entire world from the duty [to pray with *kavvana*] from the day that the holy Temple was destroyed until now, as the verse says, "Therefore, listen to this, unhappy one, who are drunk but not with wine!" (Isaiah 51:21)

In the verse from Isaiah, God addresses the Jewish people, whom He is about to console. He calls them "drunk" because of their troubles. Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah considered the hardships about which Isaiah prophesied to be the destruction, oppression, and exile the Jewish people suffered in his time. Now, a person who is "drunk" (even without wine!) cannot concentrate, nor can he be expected to pray properly. Therefore, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah claimed that Jews cannot be held responsible to pray with *kavvanat ha-lev* ever since Jerusalem was destroyed.

Note that Rabbi Elazar only said that he *could have* nullified the demand for prayer with *kavvana*, but he didn't actually do so.<sup>2</sup> In fact, such a desire to preserve the outward forms of prayer, even when they have been emptied of their inner meaning, is an attitude which played an ever-increasing role in the halakha, as we shall see later in this book. But it is also important that, after Rabbi Elazar's extreme statement, the gemara continued his thought about the difficulty of *kavvana* by listing some examples of situations in which rabbis declared that it was better *not* to pray because it was impossible for a person to think clearly (*ein da'ot meyushevet 'alav*). The most important of these examples, such as not praying for three days after a difficult journey, were accepted by the halakha as proper practice. These two contrasting attitudes, namely the realization that it is better not to recite tefillot if one cannot sincerely mean what he says, versus the desire to preserve the institution of prayer even when *kavvana* cannot be guaranteed, have continued to create a unique tension in the halakhic conception of prayer to this day.

Even men of the greatest scholarship and piety found that they usually failed to achieve *kavvana*. The anonymous author of the medieval ethical

2. For this point and some other crucial remarks about Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah's statement, see Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, *Yabia Omer*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem, reprinted 1986), no. 10:4.

work called *Orhot Tzaddikim* made *kavvana* for *tefilla* his main example of mitzvot that "even the great men of the generation and its scholars [*gedolai ha-dor ve-hakhamav*] are not careful about."<sup>3</sup> The problem was equally pressing for the rabbis in the era of the mishna:

When Rabbi Eliezer was ill, his students came in to visit him. They said to him, "Our Master! Show us the paths of life through which we may merit to live in the World to Come!"

He said to them, "Be very careful about the dignity of your friends. Keep your children away from frivolous studies<sup>4</sup> and sit them on the laps of Torah scholars. And when you pray, recognize before whom you stand. For doing this you will deserve life in the World to Come." (*Berakhot* 28b)

Note that this advice was not that of a preacher to the common people, but the last command of Rabbi Eliezer to his distinguished students as he lay upon his deathbed. Thus, scholarship did not guarantee that one's prayers would be meaningful in mishnaic times. Also during the period of the mishna, an anonymous scholar pointed out (*Berakhot* 32b) that prayer is one of just four areas of human activity for which a biblical verse hints that there is a constant need of renewed efforts. (The other three areas that require constant effort are Torah study, good deeds, and working for the public good.) Later, in amoraic times, Rav remarked that lack of *kavvana* is

3. *Sha'ar ha-Teshuva*, p. 164 in *Orhot Tzaddikim Ha-Shalem*, ed. Gavriel Zalushinsky (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1988). Zalushinsky musters evidence that the book must have been written in the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries, though he considers the fifteenth more likely (introduction, pp. 1–2).

It is no accident that this comment is found in the chapter on repentance in *Orhot Tzaddikim*; prayer without *kavvana* is an obvious candidate for lists of sins that are committed so widely that practically everyone must repent for them. In the early nineteenth century, Rabbi Abraham Danzig made the same sort of remark in his discussion of repentance in *Hayyei Adam* (no. 143): "There are bundles of sins which people commonly commit, too many to be counted. . . . And especially all of the prayers and blessings, if a person analyzes himself seriously [he will realize that], among our many sins, every one of them is without *kavvana*. Let us only be grateful that a person's mouth and tongue is fully trained to pray and say blessings!" (This last remark is in exactly the same spirit as Rabbi Matnaya's comment recorded in the Jerusalem Talmud, quoted immediately below! Is this conscious imitation or a coincidence?) At the end of the list *Hayyei Adam* the text concludes, "People are very used to doing all of these things. Even exceptional scholars, if they consider themselves carefully, will find that most of them fail in most of these ways. . . ."

On the widespread neglect of prayer also see *Berakhot* 6b, where *tefilla* is described as a thing "which men treat with contempt." (From the context it is clear that the midrashic interpretation of the verse in question is referring to synagogue worship, as Rashi points out.)

4. "Frivolous studies" is an attempt to capture the range of meaning found in the various interpretations of *higayon*. The exact nuances of the term are not relevant to our discussion here.

one of three frequent sins about which it may be said that “a person cannot avoid them every day.” (The other two are sinful thoughts and mild gossip.)<sup>5</sup> We may assume that both Rav and the anonymous mishnaic scholar meant what they said for scholars as well as for average people. In case any doubt remains, let us read what four other talmudic sages said about the terrible obstacles that prevented them from achieving *kavvana*:

Rabbi Hiyya said, “I never concentrated during prayer in all my days! Once I wanted to concentrate, but I thought about who will meet the king first: the *Arkafia* [a Persian high official] or the Exilarch [the head of the Jewish community in Persia]?”

Shemuel said, “I count clouds [during prayer].”

Rabbi Bun bar Hiyya said, “I count the layers of stones in the wall [while I pray].”

Rabbi Matnaya said, “I am grateful to my head, because it bows by itself when I reach ‘*Modim*!’”<sup>6</sup>

5. *Bava Batra* 164b. The issue of *iiyun tefilla* and *ha-ma’arikh bitfillato* is simple and straightforward at its core, but it became complicated because of apparent contradictions that had to be resolved first in the *gemara* and once again later by the *tosafot*. The basic solution to all the contradictions is found in *Berakhot* 54b–55a, where the *gemara* shows that *iiyun tefilla* and *ha-ma’arikh bitfillato* can both have two opposite meanings depending on the context: Either they mean that a person says his prayers slowly and carefully with *kavvana* (this is the “positive” meaning) or that he prays excessively and then waits, arrogantly expecting God to answer his prayer because he thinks he deserves it for praying (the negative meaning). This solves the basic issue, but the *tosafot* still had to decide which of these two opposite meanings was correct whenever these phrases appear in ambiguous contexts.

As I presented it, according to Rav sinning through *iiyun tefilla* means a lack of *kavvana* (*kavvana* is the positive meaning, but here he doesn't have it). This is against the opinion (*yesh mefareshim*) quoted in Rashi, according to which the problem of *iiyun tefilla* is that a person arrogantly decides he has a right to expect God to answer his prayer (the negative meaning). Rashi's interpretation of our passage in *Bava Batra* is disproved by *tosafot Berakhot* 32b s.v. *kol* and *Shabbat* 118b s.v. *iiyun tefilla*. However, the context makes it clear that Rashi's negative interpretation of *iiyun tefilla* is indeed the meaning of the phrase in *Rosh Hashanah* 16b. (Note that when the *tosafot* to *Rosh Hashanah* 16b disproved Rabbenu Tam's interpretation, they only rejected his reading of the *Rosh Hashanah* passage in the name of Rabbi Yitzhak, but not his interpretation of Rav's statement in *Bava Batra*. The interpretation of Rav's passage in *Bava Batra* remains as I have presented it here, following the *tosafot* and Rabbenu Tam but not Rashi.)

For further examples of positive *iiyun tefilla*, meaning “thoughtful prayer with *kavvana*,” see *Shabbat* 118b and 127a; for the idea that slow prayer is meritorious, see Rabbi Hanina's praise for the concept in *Berakhot* 32b and Rav Yehuda's on 54b. The negative kinds of *iiyun tefilla* and slow prayer will be mentioned later, in chapter four.

6. *Yerushalmi Berakhot*, end of 2:4 (16a in the standard Vilna edition). For convenient reference, the entire passage is cited by *tosafot* on *Rosh Hashanah* 16b (s.v. *iiyun tefilla*), but it is worth seeing it in the context of the previous discussion in the *Yerushalmi* for reasons that will become clear below. It is also referred to and partially quoted by the *tosafot* on *Shabbat* 118b.

In other words, Rabbi Hiyya found it impossible to concentrate during his prayers. Once he made a special effort to have kavvana while he prayed, but instead he found himself thinking about Persian politics! Shemuel and Rabbi Bun occupied their minds during prayer by counting clouds or stones in the wall, respectively. Finally, Rabbi Matnaya admitted his lack of concentration was so bad that he would not even have remembered to bow if had he not taught his head to bend habitually at the right times.

One commentary on the above passage asks why these four statements were preserved at all in the gemara. After all, even if these four great rabbis could not pray with concentration, what practical value does this fact have for us? The answer given is that these remarks were included to reassure other Jews who have trouble concentrating, by informing them that even the rabbis of talmudic times had major trouble with *kavvana*.<sup>7</sup>

In our day it becomes obvious to anyone who participates in *tefilla*

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My translation of Shemuel's remark is based on the conclusion of Saul Liebermann, who accepted the variant reading *perohayya* ("floating clouds") rather than *'afrohayya* ("flocks of birds"). He compared our text of the *Yerushalmi* to a striking parallel in a peculiar comment by the Church Father Tortoleanus. The Church Father advised: "Let one count the clouds when he prays, and another the beams in the ceiling." The similarity seems too close to be a coincidence, though what these strange comments by men far removed from each other might have in common is unknown.

"Sometimes," commented Liebermann, "we find the same mystery among Hazal and the nations of the world." But even after solving the linguistic problem based on the above parallel, he concluded that "the matter remains unsolved." See "Rays from the East," *Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientales et Slaves* IX (Bruxelles: Melanges Gregoire, 1949): 409–420; "Mashehu 'al Hashba'ot be-Yisrael," *Tarbiz* 27 (5718): 183–189. (I saw the *Tarbiz* article.)

Professor Meir Bar-Ilan came to a far-reaching conclusion based on Liebermann's proposal. See *Sitrei Tefilla ve-Heikhalot* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1987), p. 158, where he argues that both the Church Father and the *Yerushalmi* were recommending visual aids (counting clouds or ceiling beams) to enable a person to keep track of how many words he has recited for mystical reasons. But this theory is difficult to accept because it doesn't fit the context of the gemara. Bar-Ilan quotes the passage from the *Yerushalmi* selectively, leaving out the statements of Rabbi Hiyya and Rabbi Matnaya, which obviously don't fit into his theory. Though Bar-Ilan is aware of the traditional interpretation: "Shemuel and Rabbi Bun bar Hiyya counted things when they couldn't concentrate and distracted themselves from prayer," he simply dismisses it: "This explanation doesn't seem correct" (*Ibid.*, no. 17). He gives no reason why this interpretation, which (unlike his own) fits all four talmudic statements equally well and also the context of the *Yerushalmi*'s preceding discussion, is not plausible.

Bar-Ilan could argue that his interpretation of Shemuel and Rabbi Bun is actually what they meant (i.e., that they counted words for mystical reasons) but that the compilers of the *Yerushalmi* misunderstood their intentions, and therefore recorded their statements along with those of other scholars who didn't concentrate during prayers. I, however, prefer the traditional interpretation, or to be more cautious and admit that the matter "remains unsolved" as Liebermann did.

7. See the commentary *Toledot Yitzhak* by Rabbi Yitzhak Isaac Krasilshikov of Moscow, the manuscript of which was smuggled out of the Soviet Union and published by *Mahon Mutzal me-Esh* in their new edition of *Yerushalmi Berakhot* (Bnei



*be-tzibbur* (community prayer) on a daily basis, whether in Israel or the Diaspora, that rote, mechanical reading has triumphed over any sense of communication with God in most of our prayers. That this is so should trouble us. It should bother us not only as individuals who invest a tremendous amount of time on tefilla each and every day (as well as huge financial resources to build and operate synagogues), but also as Jews who respect the *geonim* and *tzaddikim* (men of scholarship and piety) throughout the generations who composed and instituted our tefillot. What we often reduce their efforts to in our practice of prayer is no less than a disgrace to the words they composed and to their lofty intentions. But most importantly, as Rabbenu Bahya made so clear, the careless frame of mind with which we recite words that are addressed directly to God Himself should acutely distress us.

The problem with tefilla today has been well described by Professor Uriel Simon, a well known Orthodox Israeli biblical scholar and educator:

Prayer . . . generally stands out as an almost mechanical muttering, at a speed which prevents contemplation, and often as a hum of whispers from the mouths those who "trample the courtyards of the Lord."<sup>8</sup> The eyes of many pray-ers are closed and their faces asleep, and during weekday prayers or on regular Shabbatot they never awaken, except on a very few special occasions. Also, uniting the community into a "praying congregation" is much too rare, and however much this is achieved it is more because of joint participation and pleasant tunes than because of an inner identification with the plural language that most of our prayers are based upon: "You love us," "bring us back," "heal us," and "let us lie down to sleep in peace." One who hears how the plea for mercy for "our brothers who are in pain and captivity" is said, clearly senses that it isn't meant about real brothers, like those who are strangling in the Syrian ghetto or a Soviet jail. . . .

Listen to how the triple *kedusha* is said or sung, and you will be convinced that it is no experience of existential awe. Listen to how the words of *vidduy* (confession) are quickly swallowed on weekdays, and you know that you are not part of an act of repentance or cleansing. And worst of all: try to pray at the pace of the *sheli'ah tzibbur* (prayer leader), and you will very quickly need to choose between a rushed mumbling of all the tefillot, or saying just some of them while paying

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Brak, 5740), 29a. He wrote, "It is possible that they didn't want our spirits to fall because of the fact that we don't completely concentrate in prayer."

8. This phrase is based on the words of Isaiah (1:11-12): "What need have I of all your sacrifices?", says the Lord . . . "When you come to appear before Me—who asked of you to trample My courts?"

It is clear that criticisms like this one, once hurled by the prophets at insincere sacrifices, can also be applied to prayer. For criticisms in the Bible aimed specifically at insincere prayer, see the beginning of the next chapter.

attention. Most people who pray choose the first way, and therefore the time of prayer is not a time of effortful, spiritual and soulful labor.<sup>9</sup>

9. "Limud ha-Siddur ki-Truma le-Takkanat ha-Tefilla" in *Prayer in Judaism: Continuity and Change*, ed. Gabriel H. Cohn (Jerusalem: Ahval 1978), pp. 219–220.

Simon opened his essay with an important statement by Hazon Ish: "Tefilla has been a mitzva which requires specific behavior from us ever since the Men of the Great Assembly arranged an exact, unchanging text for it. But it is still essentially a mitzva involving thought and a duty of the heart, and anyone who doesn't fulfil his obligation from the heart has achieved nothing through his action, for prayer is nothing if not a service of God in a person's heart . . ."

Simon continues by idealizing the way prayer is practiced in yeshiva communities influenced by Hazon Ish, and contrasts this favorably to the way prayer is practiced in Israeli public religious education (*hinnukh dati*) and in the segment of Israeli society associated with "religious Zionism." He claims that *hinnukh dati* has succeeded in the "operative" aspect of teaching children to pray, but that teaching them to say the words rarely leads them to develop deeper kavvana later in their lives.

While I do agree with Simon that tefilla in yeshiva communities should be emulated in some ways, I cannot agree that, overall, they are an acceptable model for prayer by most Jews.

Some yeshiva communities deserve credit for two great achievements: Firstly, many yeshivot allot a reasonable amount of time for the *tefillot* in the *siddur*. If this means that at least an hour must be set aside for *shaharit* every day—so be it. If it means that *mincha* must take twenty-five minutes on an average day (unlike the "rush job" that most Jews do, when they finish in ten minutes flat!), then that is what must be done. These yeshivot take it for granted that enough time must be allotted to recite all the *tefillot* at a reasonable pace. When praying in a yeshiva it is not unusual to hear *tefillot* that are normally rushed recited slowly and with fervor.

Secondly, most *benei yeshiva* are trained to take *tefilla* seriously as an halakhic obligation, making sure to study the halakhot of *tefilla* in all of their details and follow them. This includes the obligation to at least try to focus on the meaning of the words (*perush ha-millot*) in every prayer.

However, in later chapters we will encounter several serious objections to taking *tefilla* as it is practiced in yeshiva communities as a model for what prayer should be in the broader religious community as well. Briefly, there are three major objections:

a) This model is not valid for the "real world" where time for prayer on an average day is much more limited than in a yeshiva environment (we will discuss the "time" factor at great length in chapter twelve);

b) It is doubtful that kavvana is maintained throughout *tefilla* even by yeshiva students. Focusing on *perush ha-millot* for every single *tefilla* may be an ideal for everyone in a yeshiva, but it is only achieved by a few. The rest simply learn to pronounce all of the *tefillot* carefully as a habit, even though they cannot possibly maintain concentration for so long. Thus, yeshiva students also practice a great deal of rote prayer (even when they pray slowly). Furthermore, in chapter five we will question whether *perush ha-millot* is an adequate or useful definition of kavvana; also see chapter twelve on how even slow, carefully recited prayers can easily become *keva*;

c) Finally, as Simon's quotation from Hazon Ish implies, the yeshivot leave little room for personal expression (*hiddush*) in the words of an individual's prayer. We will address this neglected aspect of *tefilla* at length in chapters eight through twelve.

To take Simon's description of daily prayer one step further, imagine what might have happened to the great German-Jewish thinker Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929), had he made a slightly different choice than the one he actually did make. The well-known story is that before he was to be baptized to become a Protestant (because he had never found any spiritual depth in Judaism), he visited a small Orthodox synagogue in Berlin during Yom Kippur, on the eve of Kol Nidrei. He was so overwhelmed by the solemnity and spiritual depth of the service that he elected to remain a Jew. In the end he contributed a great deal to Jewish thought and learning in the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup>

Yet what might have happened had Rosenzweig instead chosen to visit a minyan for one of the three regular daily prayers (*shaharit*, *minha* or *ma'ariv*)? Or even if he had visited on an average Shabbat? He could not have failed to be shocked by the mumbling of so many pages of moving liturgy in an unbearably boring monotone and at an impossibly rapid pace. It is strange that committed, observant Jews accept this as the way things should be, and often look down on those who don't attend minyan regularly. Is it possible that many otherwise observant Jews who do not participate daily in *tefillah be-tzibbur*, fail to do so not only because of a lack of time or effort, but also because, more deeply, they sense that there is no religious value in it?

To really understand how daily prayer fails for religious Jews, compare it to a different mitzva: Shabbat. The Jewish people have always loved Shabbat in a wonderful way. We compose songs and sing them in her honor. We wait all week for her with eagerness, and then feel let down when she leaves. Many an Orthodox Jew today is genuinely surprised when he hears that a non-Jew or a non-observant Jew thinks keeping Shabbat would be a difficult task and an unpleasant burden. The Orthodox Jew, on the contrary, loves Shabbat, and he may even think that life without it would be hard to bear.

I am not unrealistic about Shabbat observance. I know that many observant Jews, including myself, could make their Shabbatot even better. We could study and observe the laws of Shabbat with greater care. We could devote ourselves more wholly to family, friends, Torah study, and song on Shabbat, and do a better job avoiding business discussions and politics. We could take better care to avoid weekday activities on Shabbat, things which are technically permitted but not in the spirit of the day. We could make an extra special effort to act kindly to the people around us, thus preserving *shalom bayit* (peace in the home) all the time, but on Shabbat especially. All of these ideas would make Shabbat an even more special and wonderful day.

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10. On Rosenzweig (including the story of the synagogue visit) see "Rosenzweig, Franz" in *Encyclopedia Judaica* 14, col. 299–303. Though Rosenzweig's decision to remain a Jew undoubtedly had deeper roots in his own developing thought processes, there is no reason to doubt that the synagogue experience had a significant impact as well.

But even granting these flaws, Shabbat is still a success in religious terms for the countless Jews who do cherish it and honor it. In the Shabbat prayers we thank God for the Sabbath, calling it a precious and beloved gift, and there are not just a few Jews who mean this with utter honesty and sincerity when they say it.

Unfortunately, the same thing cannot be said of daily prayer. Only a fraction of the Jews who observe Shabbat pray with a minyan every day, though most of the others pray at home. But whether with a minyan or privately, few are the Jews to whom the daily prayers mean anything, even on occasion. Some say that the cumulative effect of praying every day for a lifetime is what counts, even if almost every day is devoid of meaning by itself. But the same thing could be said of Shabbat, and it just doesn't ring true: if every Shabbat were just rote observance of the rules, without the heart, then even a lifetime of Shabbatot would not have the effect we know Shabbat has. The reason Shabbat works for so many of us is that we strive to put meaning into it, knowing it is a mitzva to make Shabbat special beyond just staying within the parameters of its laws. When we fail to give Shabbat meaning we sense it innately, without having to be told. If I may be excused for using the term this way, Shabbat is a religious success because it is observed with "*kavvana*." But when it comes to daily prayer, even truly religious Jews—people who are sincerely committed to keeping God's mitzvot as they should be done—still accept prayer as a rote activity bereft of meaning, day after day for a lifetime.

I once pointed out to a friend that almost no Jewish child who is taught to pray, by his parents or in school, has ever seen someone break down and cry during a regular daily *shaharit*. That is a rare event to witness even on Yom Kippur, let alone on a weekday! My friend responded that I was expecting too much, and that it is impossible for a person to conjure up such intense emotions several times a day.

No doubt my friend is correct; it really is impossible. But the problem with our thrice daily prayers is not that each of us doesn't pray intensely (and weep or laugh or moan) every single time. That is indeed too much to demand of any person, although Hazal still expected us to make the effort. The true problem is that throughout their entire lives, most people rarely or never feel intense emotions during the daily tefillot, nor do they witness others doing so. It is horrible to say, but impossible to avoid mentioning, that if a Jew were to break down and cry during one of the regular daily prayers in the synagogue, those who saw him would probably think he was either extremely pious or mentally unbalanced! To mean what you say to God so much that it makes you cry is just not considered something that a normal person does. This sad fact shows how alien truly sincere prayer has become to us. If experiencing (or even witnessing) such devotion was at least a common part of the daily prayers, rather than a shocking exception to the rule, then we would know that our sense of prayer was healthy.

## DEFINITIONS OF KEVA AND TAHANUN

Hazal used the word *keva* to designate the act of prayer when it is a perfunctory recitation without sincerity. In rabbinic writings the Hebrew

term *keva* is used in various contexts, all of which have to do with “fixing” something in place.<sup>11</sup> It often means to drive in a nail or to fasten something tightly with a nail. And although it isn’t explicitly mentioned in the Talmud, the customary blessing recited when affixing a mezuzah is *likboa mezuzah*, which means that the mezuzah is to be attached firmly in place, so that it cannot move. In a different context, Shammai recommended a person make his Torah study “*keva*,” meaning that such study is best pursued according to a fixed schedule. However, *keva* is often mentioned as a negative factor in discussions about prayer.

*Tahanun*, on the other hand, is the word Hazal used for the best type of prayer, which is a direct, heart-felt plea to God for mercy. Two rabbis contrasted these two terms in the Mishna:

Rabbi Shim’on says: Be careful about reading the *Shema* and about prayer. And when you pray, don’t make your prayer *keva*; instead make it a plea for grace [*rahamim*] and compassion [*tahanunim*] before God, blessed is He. As it says (Joel 2:13), “For he is gracious [*hanun*] and compassionate [*raham*], slow to anger, abounding in kindness, and he will renounce punishment.” (Avot 2:18)

Rabbi Eliezer says: One who makes his prayer *keva*—his prayer is not *tahanunim*. (*Berakhot* 4:4, 28b)<sup>12</sup>

But what sorts of prayer are called *keva*? The gemara in *Berakhot* gives four examples of what Rabbi Eliezer meant by prayer that is *keva*, and each of these examples deserves serious consideration. They may be read as complimentary to each other, though each emphasizes a different aspect of “*keva*”:

What is “*keva*”?

[1] Rabbi Ya’akov bar Iddi said in the name of Rabbi Osh’aya: Anyone whose tefilla seems like a burden to him.

[2] The rabbis said: Whoever doesn’t say it in the language of *tahanunim*.

[3] Rabba and Rav Yosef both said: Whoever isn’t able to say something new in it. (Rabbi Zeira said: I am able to say something new in it, but I worry that I may become confused.)

[4] Abbaye bar Avin and Rabbi Hanina bar Avin both said: Whoever does not pray with the red of the sun [*dimdumei hamma*, i.e., sunrise]. (*Berakhot* 29b)

11. In the Bible, the root *qb’* has an entirely different range of meaning. Its exact nuance is unclear, but it can mean to rob or mislead someone, or to confiscate his property (cf. Malachi 3:8 and Proverbs 22:23).

There are several occurrences of the root in our sense in mishnaic Hebrew, some of them concerning prayer. But *keva* meaning “fixed” is most prevalent in the Aramaic of the Talmud, not in its Hebrew.

12. On the possibility that these two mishnayot contradict each other, see chapter eight, note 12.

Rabbi Osh'aya, whose opinion was recorded first here, says that prayer must not be thought of or treated as a burden. Elsewhere, the Talmud records a similar notion: "One must not hurl a blessing from his lips" (*Berakhot* 47a). Rashi on that passage explains that one may not say a blessing "hastily, as if it were a burden, but [he says it anyway] because it is a fixed obligation for him [*hok kavua hu etzlo*]." Thus *keva*, according to Rabbi Osh'aya, means having to do something that you really have no desire to do. People tend to accomplish such tasks hastily and with as little mental involvement as possible.

In the second opinion recorded here, the majority of the rabbis held that *keva* means prayer which is not said as *tahanunim*. But this just seems to repeat Rabbi Eliezer's statement without adding any explanation at all! Since, however, they defined *keva* as the absence of *tahanunim*, it is worth seeing how the opposite term has been defined. The thirteenth-century commentary of Rabbi Aharon ha-Levy (known as "Re'ah") on this passage tells us that in prayer which is not *tahanunim* a Jew arrogantly demands his needs from God. About a century later the *Tur* (one of the most important halakhic codes) illustrated *tahanunim* with the image of "a poor man who stands in the doorway (begging)."<sup>13</sup> Both these notions are found in the sixteenth century writings of Rabbi Yehuda Leow (Maharal) of Prague (1525–1609), who described *tahanunim* as prayer "like a slave who pleads to his master. Because if he did not [pray in this way], it would seem as if he thinks his request is his rightful due."<sup>14</sup> In short, *tahanun* is an act of prayer with a properly modest attitude, and the majority of the rabbis invalidated any prayer which is not humble. *Keva*, on the other hand, means arrogant "prayer," which the rabbis imply has no value.

Rabbi Abahu, whose interpretation of *keva* is recorded in the Talmud *Yerushalmi* on the same mishna, expressed a similar notion. He ruled that a *mitpallel* (one who prays) must not be "like a person reading from a letter." For Rabbi Abahu, as for the majority of the rabbis, prayer must sound like sincere supplication.<sup>15</sup>

Rabbenu Hannanel (a very early commentator on the Talmud in eleventh century Tunisia) wrote that this opinion of the rabbis should be viewed as more lenient than that of Rabbi Osh'aya. (As we saw above, Rabbi Osh'aya felt that prayer which is *keva* is prayer which seems like a burden to the pray-er.) According to the rabbis, even if a person does feel that prayer is a

13. *Tur Orah Hayyim* 98.

Also see *Sha'arei Teshuva* on *Orah Hayyim* 98:1 quoting the students of Isaac Luria that "when one reaches the words 'Who supports the poor [*ozar dalim*]' he should think to himself that he is a poor man begging at the door, even if he is a rich man."

14. *Netivot 'Olam, Netiv ha-Avoda*, chapter six.

For talmudic descriptions of a person who prays as a "servant before his master" see *Berakhot* 34b and *Shabbat* 10a.

15. *Yerushalmi Berakhot* 4:4. This interpretation of Rabbi Abahu, equating his statement with view of the rabbis in the *Bavli*, is that of the Meiri as well as the standard commentaries on the *Yerushalmi*. For another possible interpretation, see note 17 below.

burden, he still fulfils his obligation to pray if he uses words that sound modest and sincere; in this regard they are less stringent. But about two centuries after Rabbenu Hannanel, the talmudist Rabbenu Yonah of Gerona (Spain) pointed out that the opposite is true as well: The opinion of the rabbis is more stringent because even if a Jew sincerely wants to pray, and he does not view it as a burdensome task, he will still be considered as not having offered any prayer at all if he has not used the modest language of *tahanunim*.

In any case, both of these opinions were accepted as binding obligations in the halakha. When a Jew prays, his basic duty (*lekhatilla*) is both to plead to God for mercy with sincerity and modesty, and also not to view his duty to pray as a useless burden.

What was the fate, though, of the other two interpretations of *keva*? Neither of them was accepted by the *posekim* (rabbinic authorities who rule on matters of halakha). The opinion of Rabbi Avin's two sons was that a person has a duty to pray early at sunrise. Like Rabbi Osh'aya, they worried that the duty to pray might be viewed as a burden. They, however, felt that early prayer is not *keva*, since people usually like to push off their burdens until later. Nevertheless, this view was not accepted. Prayer at sunrise instead became known as an act of exceptional piety practiced by those known as the *vatikin* (a title of respect for the *tzaddikim* of previous generations).<sup>16</sup>

The view of Rabba and Rav Yosef was that a person should say something new to God every time he prayed. Not only was prayer never meant to be entirely fixed, but an unchanging text would force prayer to become an act of mindlessly repeating words that were learned by rote. A person cannot and should not approach God if he has no new praise, request, or thanksgiving, or no new confession to make. Prayer by a person who "isn't able to say something new" was described by Rashi thus: "Just like today—it was the same yesterday and it will be the same tomorrow!"<sup>17</sup>

However, Rabbi Zeira's worry that he would become confused if he said something new each time he prayed helped to overcome the halakha's objection to completely fixed prayer. (In the Talmud Yerushalmi, Rabbi Zeira is quoted as saying, "Every time I say something new I make a mistake!") Rabbenu Hannanel later pointed out that since even Rabbi Zeira

16. See *Berakhot* 26a on the requirement to pray at sunrise, where the gemara resolves an apparent contradiction on the matter by referring to the *vatikin*. In Yiddish, the word *vasikin* has come to be used exclusively for praying at sunrise, as in the expression *davvenin vasikin*.

17. *Berakhot* 29b, Rashi s.v. *le-haddesh bo davar*.

It is possible that the opinion of Rabbi Abahu in the *Talmud Yerushalmi* (which we quoted earlier) is also expressing the same sentiments as Rabba and Rav Yosef as explained by Rashi here in the Bavli. When he said that the act of prayer must not be "like a person reading from a letter," Rabbi Abahu may have been objecting to viewing prayer as the recitation of a "given" text, rather than as a creative labor that changes for every individual each time he prays.

was confused by innovations during his prayers, we cannot demand that Jews of lesser stature say "something new" each time.<sup>18</sup> This may be why Rabba and Rav Yosef's opinion was not accepted in the halakha.

Later in this book we will see that Rabbi Zeira's attitude was one factor that made the text of Jewish prayer become increasingly rigid over the course of history. We shall also note a parallel trend: As the texts of prayer became ever more rigid, the halakha tended to expect and demand less *kavvana* from Jews who prayed.

## PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

The problem we've discussed in this chapter is very old and very real, and it should be a matter of tremendous concern for Jews who consider themselves to be *shomrei mitzvot Hashem* (obedient to God's commandments). Many people today genuinely wish that their prayers could be more like what *tefilla* should "really be." But they are usually not aware that their problem is an ancient one; as we saw earlier in this chapter, disillusionment with *tefilla* is a problem that has plagued Jews for thousands of years. In order to tackle the problem for *our* generation we must first understand its roots in the past. It is crucial for us to examine *tefilla*, not in its "ideal" state and not as Hazal intended it to be, but as it has actually been practiced. We must try to understand how and why *tefilla* became a dismal failure so often, not just nowadays but even in the distant past. Above all, we must try to understand the disturbing but important fact that the talmudic requirement for *kavvana* we discussed in this chapter, which was so all-important to Hazal, was dispensed of almost entirely as an halakhic necessity in post-talmudic times. In addition, we should examine what some contemporary *posekim* have to say about the requirement for *kavvana*.

Next, on a positive note, we must define what our ideals for *tefilla* are. One prominent rabbi recently said that he looks forward to the day when he "can *davven* with a capital D" (when he retires). But what does that mean? How should *tefilla* "really" be, and what would an "ideal" prayer be like? What is prayer supposed to achieve? What did Hazal intend us to experience when they legislated obligatory prayers for *Kelal Yisrael* (the

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18. *Perushei Rabbeinu Hannanel le-Masekhet Berakhot*, ed. David Metzger (Jerusalem: Mahon Lev Sameah, 1990), p. 62.

Note that according to this definition of *keva*, Rabbi Zeira did not pray correctly! In his defense it is possible to suggest that even if "*keva*" means "whoever isn't able to say something new in it," Rabbi Zeira had enough devotion to be able to say something new to God (but did not because he was afraid of becoming confused). Thus, he still fulfilled his obligation.

It is more likely, however, that Rabbi Zeira found "*le-haddesh bo davar*" to be an impossible demand on a regular basis, and simply denied that the halakha would obligate a person to do something that is beyond his capabilities. In other words, he rejects the opinion of Rabba and Rav Yosef. But they would still claim that he does not fulfil his obligation without *hiddush*.



community of Israel)? It seems that we should carefully define our goals before we look for solutions.

Answering these very basic questions is a much more complicated task than it seems. Although most people to whom the questions might be posed could formulate a conception of "ideal" prayer with "perfect" *kavvana*, their solution would be rejected by many others. In fact, there are as many definitions of "*kavvana*" as there are answers to the questions "Why do we pray?" and "What is prayer?" As we shall see, these questions have been answered in a wide variety of ways throughout Jewish history. In fact, the outlooks on prayer are so diverse that some of the answers given to "Why do we pray?" directly contradicted the plain meaning of the prayers themselves! It is my opinion that the ambiguity about the very purpose of prayer has in itself contributed to the decline of meaning in *tefilla*. Basically, is very difficult for a person to improve his *kavvana* without having come to a conclusion, on a personal level, about why he is engaging in prayer. And such a conclusion will still not suffice unless it allows the *mitpallel* to identify, in one way or another, with the format and words of the prayers that he actually says.

After surveying the various philosophies of prayer it will become important to look at the state of the prayers themselves. The structure of prescribed prayer (i.e., the text of the siddur) is quite different today than it was for Hazal. Over the years the wording of the text has become much more rigid, as well as much lengthier, and it is has been argued that this "hardening" of *tefilla* contributed much to the loss of spirituality in Jewish prayer. It is important to consider these arguments, which have mostly come from academic circles, and to re-examine the phenomenon of the "hardening of prayer" in light of rabbinic and halakhic opinions on the issue.

It is only after an analysis of the views on these major topics that it will be reasonable to suggest practical solutions to the major problem we began with, namely: What can be done to turn *tefilla* into an activity with spiritual depth for more of the people who practice it? And so, this book is meant to address four very basic issues:

- (1) Is *kavvana* crucial for Jewish prayer? If it is, then why did the halakha stop demanding it as an absolute prerequisite? (Part I, including the present chapter)
- (2) What actually *is* *kavvana*? Or more precisely: What is the nature of a perfect or "ideal" prayer, and what does it aim to achieve? (Part II)
- (3) How did the fixed, prescribed prayers of the siddur come to be? Should reciting the exact words of the siddur be considered the basic act of Jewish prayer or not? (Part III)
- (4) What can be done to improve our *tefilla*? (Part IV)

It is to the first of these questions that we'll now turn.

## Prayer Without Kavvana

Rabbi Zeira said: One who says "*Shema*" twice is like one who says "*Modim*" twice [and he must be silenced]. . . .

Rav Pappa asked Rava: But maybe he didn't pay attention the first time, and this time he concentrated?

[Rava] replied: Has he become overly familiar with God? If he doesn't pay attention, let me hit him with a blacksmith's hammer so that he will!

(*Megilla* 25a)

### RABBI ELIEZER'S RULE ON KAVVANA

The Talmud tells us that Rabbi Zeira witnessed his colleague, Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba, pray privately twice one morning. When Rabbi Hiyya finished, Rabbi Zeira asked him for an explanation of his behavior. But before giving Rabbi Hiyya a chance to reply, Rabbi Zeira pointed out that praying twice could not possibly be justified on the basis of having failed to concentrate the first time. If that had been the case, then Rabbi Hiyya would have violated Rabbi Eliezer's rule:

Rabbi Eliezer said: A person should always evaluate himself. If he is able to concentrate [*lekhavven et libbo*], then he should pray. But if he is not able to, he must not pray. (*Berakhot* 30b)

The answer to the riddle of Rabbi Hiyya's double prayer was that Rabbi Hiyya forgot to add the special petition mentioning *Rosh Hodesh* (the new month) when he prayed privately the first time. But for our purposes, Rabbi Eliezer's statement is the most important thing to consider: this rule prohibiting prayer without *kavvana* has always been accepted by all halakhic authorities, at least in principle. The same is true of some similar statements recorded in *Eruvin* (65a), such as: "Rabbi Elazar says: One who

returns from a journey must not pray for three days." (Rabbi Elazar assumes that most journeys entail great physical hardship and mental exhaustion.) We are also told there that "Rabbi Hanina never prayed on a day when he was upset."

Hazal opposed a person praying at any time or in any situation when he cannot concentrate. Even the mitzva of Torah study, despite its overwhelming value and importance, was considered a possible distraction during times of prayer. They ruled that a person may not pray directly after studying a complicated halakhic issue, only permitting prayer after a person has learned a simple, uncontroversial law (*Berakhot* 31a). As Rabbi Israel ben Petahiah Isserlein (best known as the fifteenth-century author of the halakhic work *Terumat ha-Deshen*) explained:

"A person definitely may not pray directly after studying an undecided law, because he cannot focus his thoughts properly [on prayer]. In any case it certainly seems that matters of halakha distract a person who studies them, and his mind will be burdened. If he studies a halakha, he will not be able to focus on prayer. And if he forces consideration of the halakha out of his mind, that in itself is a distraction for him because he must force something that he wants to think about from his thoughts! Because of this, he will lose his concentration for prayer. The early [i.e., talmudic] authorities were very strict about small distractions during prayer, as it says [in *Eruvin*] . . ."<sup>1</sup>

Hazal's concern for *kavvana* was so great that, it sometimes took precedence over other laws of prayer. For instance, according to the halakha a man is required to stand still for the *Amida*, rather than say it as he walks or rides, or while he sits. Thus, when a person travels on a donkey he should be obligated to get down, secure the animal, and stand for his *tefilla*. However, Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi (the author of the Mishna) argued that, on the contrary, he should pray *while* he travels; this is because he is on a journey and he cannot help worrying about arriving at his destination late. In this case, stopping to pray is a far greater distraction than riding the donkey, because he will be too concerned about the delay to concentrate. Since he will have more *kavvana* if he prays while he rides, that is what he should do.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, it should be emphasized that prayer-without-*kavvana* is not just a "lack" in the quality of prayer. Many observant Jews, when asked, express the notion that saying prayers is a meritorious religious act in and of itself

1. *Terumat ha-Deshen*, vol. 1 (responsa), no. 41.

2. *Berakhot* 30a, and Rashi s.v. *she-ein da' to meyushevet 'alav*. Compare the version in *Tosefta Berakhot* 3:18 and see the comment of *Minhat Bikkurim* there.

Although the halakha accepts the opinion of Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi, the decision is ultimately a subjective one, dependent on the person, his situation, and how much *kavvana* he can muster at the time (*Orah Hayyim* 94:4).

On only praying with the proper frame of mind, also see *Mishna Berakhot* 5:1 and the gemara on 30b-31a.

and even without *kavvana*, and that sincere *kavvana* simply adds to that value. On the contrary! According to Rabbi Eliezer's rule and other statements we have seen in this and the last chapter, this is clearly *not* the case. Rather, prayer-without-*kavvana* is *detrimental* in and of itself, because it reveals a fundamental lack of respect for God if one talks to Him and doesn't pay attention to what he says. That is why Hazal preferred such prayers not to be said in the first place. Rambam (Maimonides) was entirely in keeping with the rabbinic view of rote prayer when he clearly stated that "saying blessings or psalms rushed or quickly is an absolute sin." He continued, "Whoever does not rebuke the *hazzanim* when they do this sins as well, because in all of these kinds of service [of God] through speech the purpose is close attention along with the recitation: The person who says them must focus his thoughts realizing that he is speaking to the Master of the World with these words."<sup>3</sup> Prayer consists of speech, but according to Rambam such speech has no meaning unless it is accompanied by *kavvana*.

Indeed, for mitzvot involving physical actions the Talmud records the opinion that "mitzvot do not need *kavvana*" (*Pesahim* 114b). This means that even though performing a mitzva through a physical action has less value without conscious intention, it may still be enough to fulfil a formal obligation. But no such opinion is recorded in the Talmud regarding prayer; rather, the rabbis of the Talmud unanimously accepted the view that prayer *does* require *kavvana* and is meaningless without it.<sup>4</sup> We shall now see that

3. *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, ed. and trans. Yitzhak Shilat (Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot, 1987), pp. 589–590 (=Yehoshua Blau, *Teshuvot ha-Rambam* [Jerusalem: Makitzei Nirdamim, 1961], no. 261). For more about reciting psalms without *kavvana*, see chapter twelve, note 16.

4. This important point is made in *Teshuvot ha-Rashba*, no. 344.

The phrase *tefilla einah tzerikha kavvana* is found in *Yerushalmi Berakhot* 2:5, but there it is a rhetorical question: "Doesn't prayer require *kavvana*?" The assumption, of course, is that it does.

However, see *Shibbolei ha-Leket* no. 17 (ed. Mirsky [Jerusalem: Sura, 5726]), where the claim is made that even prayer without any *kavvana* whatsoever, not even for the first blessing, still fulfils one's obligation. This is because prayer is compared to sacrifices, which are valid even without any specific intention. (However, both prayer and sacrifices are obviously better with *kavvana*.) *Shibbolei ha-Leket* is the only *rishon* to make such a claim, and his opinion is extremely hard to justify in light of the clear talmudic statements declaring otherwise. The only way to explain his view seems to be that he follows the opinion maintaining that prayer corresponds to the sacrifices (*Berakhot* 26b) and also considers that opinion to *disagree* with Rabbi Eliezer's rule. However, there is no evidence whatsoever that this is the case. Rabbi Eliezer's rule is not explicitly contested anywhere in the Talmud, nor by any medieval authority besides *Shibbolei ha-Leket*.

Furthermore, *Shibbolei ha-Leket* must answer Rashba's point that prayer is *not* comparable to sacrifices in terms of requiring *kavvana* because it does not involve any actions, just speech. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef convincingly shows that the opinion requiring *kavvana* must be the accepted one, despite the fact that *Shibbolei ha-Leket* is quoted approvingly by a few *aharonim*. See *Yabia' Omer*, *ibid.*, nos. 8:8–9 and 9:3–4.

the absolute rejection of rote prayer by the rabbis of the Talmud is firmly rooted in the Bible.

### KAVVANA IN THE BIBLE

Hazal did not invent the idea that prayer requires *kavvana*. In the Bible, too, sincerity is the basis of a prayer's acceptance by God. "Sincerity is a condition of worshipping the biblical God," as Moshe Greenberg has remarked.<sup>5</sup> Greenberg (who has done excellent research on biblical prayer) shows how in the Bible the words *lev* ("heart") and *nefesh* ("self," though often translated as "soul") are used to express sincerity in a similar way to the English word "wholehearted." For instance:

Delilah complains that Samson has been toying with her in repeatedly misleading her about the true source of his strength: "How can you say 'I love you' when your heart is not with me"—that is, your speech has been insincere (Judges 16:15). Proverbs 23:7 describes the miserly host thus: "'Eat and drink,' he will say, but his heart is not with you"—his profession is insincere.<sup>6</sup>

In another famous narrative (1 Samuel 1:15), the high priest Eli at the tabernacle in Shiloh thought that Hannah was drunk because she soundlessly moved her lips while she prayed. When Eli confronted her, Hannah explained that she had "been pouring out my soul [*nafshî*] to the Lord" (1 Samuel 1:15). Greenberg remarks that we, too, "speak of pouring out our guts to someone and mean the same: to expose one's innermost being, revealing its secret concerns without reservation, without withholding anything—to speak all that is in one's mind with utter sincerity and candor."<sup>7</sup>

The source for the rabbinic term *kavvanat ha-lev* ("directing the heart") is also in the Bible. Zophar, one of Job's three companions, mentions the idea explicitly: "But if you direct your heart [*hakhinota libbekha*], and spread forth your hands toward Him [in prayer]" (Job 11:13). Samuel employs the same term to say that sincere commitment to God, without wavering, is also a requirement for true repentance: "If you mean to return to the Lord with all your heart, you must remove the alien Gods and the Ashtaroth from your midst and direct your heart to the Lord [*ve-hakhinu levavkhem el Hashem*] and serve Him alone . . ." (1 Samuel 7:3).

Thus, to "direct the heart" is the Bible's way of indicating wholeheart-

5. Moshe Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer as a Window to the Popular Religion of Ancient Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 49.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 49. Cf. Lamentations 2:19, "Pour out your heart like water in the presence of the Lord!"

edness towards God in prayer or repentance. One psalm alludes to the importance of *kavvanat ha-lev* for prayer:

They recalled that God was their rock,  
That God most high was their redeemer.  
They blandished him with their mouths,  
With their tongues they lied to him,  
But their hearts were not directed towards him [*libbam lo nakhon immo*],  
They were not faithful to his covenant. (Psalms 78:35-37)<sup>8</sup>

In Isaiah 29:13 we find that God despises insincere prayers without “*lev*”:

. . . that people has approached Me with its mouth  
And honored Me with its lips,  
But it has kept its heart far from Me [*libbo rihak mimmeni*],  
And its worship of Me has been  
A commandment of men, learned by rote . . .

As opposed to these extremely negative sentiments, consider how the psalmist described positive prayer: “The Lord is near to all who call Him, to all who call to Him with sincerity [*be-emet*, literally: in truth]” (Psalms 145:8). Greenberg concludes:

The requirement of sincerity in prayer derives from its social nature as a transaction between persons. One affects another person not so much by a form of words as by the spirit that is perceived to animate them. No wording of an appeal can persuade, when the one to be persuaded mistrusts the appellant. Since extemporized prayer puts no store by a prescribed wording, the basis of its acceptance by God—of God’s being touched by it—must be the sincerity of the professions made by the pray-er.<sup>9</sup>

It should now be clear the talmudic rule with which we began this chapter, namely Rabbi Eliezer’s strict requirement for *kavvana*, merely reiterates what was taken for granted in the Bible. As we saw above, numerous statements by Hazal make it clear that prayer should never be indulged in without sincere concentration. Prayer without *kavvana* has no intrinsic positive value; on the contrary, it is detrimental because it demonstrates a lack of awe towards God. As Rashi remarked about the person mentioned in the Talmud who prayed twice because he did not concentrate the first time: “Does he speak to God without thinking as he speaks to his friend, showing when he repeats himself that he did not pay

8. Greenberg discusses the previous two examples, and the next two, in pp. 49–50. I have quoted Greenberg’s translation of Psalms 78:35–37, and the Jewish Publication Society’s translation (New York, 1985) for all the rest.

9. Greenberg, *ibid.*, p. 50.

attention the first time?"<sup>10</sup> Praying without *kavvana* was anathema to Hazal, who considered it better for a person not to pray at all. In their absolute demand for *kavvana* (and even in their use of the basic term *kavvanat ha-lev*), Hazal were entirely in keeping with biblical precedent and values.

### LIMITATIONS ON RABBI ELIEZER'S RULE

Rabbi Eliezer's law, which always requires *kavvana* for a person to be allowed to pray, is contradicted at the end of the fifth chapter of *Berakhot*. An anonymous *baraita* (a rabbinic statement excluded from the *mishna*) quoted there rules that "the pray-er must focus his mind in all of the blessings. But if he can't focus his mind during all of them, let him do so for one of them." In the *gemara*, Rabbi Hiyya explains that "one of them" specifically means the first blessing called "*Avot*."<sup>11</sup> Thus, a person may pray even if he will only pay attention to his words during the first blessing.

How are we to understand this apparent contradiction? Rabbi Eliezer seems to have required *kavvana* for *all* the blessings with *no* exceptions. One explanation is that the *baraita* in the fifth chapter simply disagrees with Rabbi Eliezer's rule. This explanation was assumed by some of the *geonim*, and was recorded for us in the late thirteenth century by the great Provincial scholar Rabbi Menahem ha-Meiri (known simply as "Meiri"): "There are some who say that in *tefilla* he hasn't fulfilled his obligation unless he has concentrated during all of the blessings." These *geonim* simply assumed that Rabbi Eliezer disagreed with the *baraita* and ruled in his favor.<sup>12</sup>

The commentary of Re'ah, however, attempts to reconcile the *baraita* with Rabbi Eliezer's statement, instead of accepting the apparent contradiction:

"The pray-er must focus his mind, but if he can't concentrate on all of [the blessings], he must focus on one of them." This means that if he already prayed, but he didn't concentrate for even one blessing, then he has not fulfilled his obligation to pray. Because if it were talking about *before* he prayed [*lekhatilla*], at that point he must be able to concentrate on *all* of them. It must be that the requirement to concentrate "for one blessing" means that even when he is done [*bedi'avad*] he must have concentrated [on at least one].

In other words, a person is not allowed to pray unless he knows that he

10. Rashi on *Megilla* 25a, s.v. *havruta kelappei shemaya*.

11. In some textual versions the one special blessing which must always have *kavvana* is "*Hoda'ah*," i.e., "*Modim*." See *Yabi'a Omer*, vol. 3 (8:7) for sources which suggest that the "one" blessing that must have *kavvana* is "*Hoda'ah*."

12. Also see Meiri's comment on the *baraita* at the end of the fifth chapter of *Berakhot* (34b), quoted below.

can concentrate throughout the entire *Amida*. But if after the fact he realizes that he only concentrated during the first blessing (*Avot*), then he has still fulfilled his obligation to pray.<sup>13</sup>

However, the majority of the *rishonim* (medieval commentaries) chose to harmonize the two contradictory statements in a different way. According to the *ba'alei ha-tosafot* (French and German scholars) and Rabbenu Asher (known as Rosh), when Rabbi Eliezer said "if he can concentrate, then he should pray," he only meant concentration during *Avot* specifically. This means that before a person prays, he must be sure that he'll be able to concentrate during *Avot*; if not, he may not pray. But he need not be able to have *kavvana* for all eighteen blessings in order to pray. Thus, the *baraita* clarifies Rabbi Eliezer's statement by limiting its scope, but does not disagree with it.

It seems evident that Rambam (Maimonides) agreed with the *tosafot* and Rosh. In his *Laws of Prayer* (4:15) he codified Rabbi Eliezer's ruling (along with a related law which we mentioned above):

What is the rule about *kavvanat ha-lev*? Any prayer without *kavvana* is not a prayer. So if one prays without *kavvana* he must pray again with *kavvana*. Therefore, one who returns from a journey fatigued or in pain is forbidden to pray until his mind is at ease [*ad she-tityashev da'ot*]. The rabbis said that he should wait three days until he is rested, and then he should pray.

But later, at the beginning of his tenth chapter, Rambam codified the *baraita*'s rule: "Whoever has prayed without concentration must pray again with concentration. But if he concentrated during the first blessing this is no longer necessary."

Various commentaries were puzzled by the fact that Rambam codified two seemingly divergent rulings. One commentary, *Lehem Mishna*, asked why Rambam didn't point out earlier, in the first passage, that *kavvana* is only required for *Avot*. He offered no solution. In fact, the author of the commentary *Lehem Yehuda* wrote that initially he thought Rambam required *kavvana* for all eighteen blessings based on Rabbi Eliezer's statement!

13. In *Yabia Omer*, vol. 3 (8:4), Rabbi Ovadia Yosef pointed out that based on the parallel version of Re'ah found in *Shita Mekubetzet* it may be that the standard version of the passage we have quoted from his commentary is incomplete, and that Re'ah actually agreed with the opinions of the *tosafot* and Rosh, which we will discuss next. (The origin of *Shita Mekubetzet* on *Berakhot* is unclear, and the text is also hard to locate. It can be found in the collection of three commentaries entitled *Berakha Meshuleshet 'al Masekhet Berakhot* [reprinted Jerusalem: Sifriyat Benei Torah, 5752]. But it is replaced by a different commentary in the newly typeset edition of *Berakha Meshuleshet* [below, chapter eight, note 15.] If we accept the version in *Shita Mekubetzet*, we are left with only two options to resolve the apparent contradiction: the single *geonic* opinion quoted in the Meiri, versus the harmonization accepted by the vast majority of *rishonim*: the *tosafot*, Rosh, Re'ah, and apparently Rambam (see below).



(This would have agreed with opinion quoted by Meiri.) But when he read Rambam's second ruling later in the tenth chapter he reconsidered.

The obvious solution to *Lehem Mishna's* question is that Rambam simply clarified his earlier ruling by stating, in his tenth chapter, that the rule requiring *kavvana* was only meant to apply to *Avot*. A number of commentaries on his *Laws of Prayer* offer this conclusion as self-evident.<sup>14</sup> Nor is this solution an uncalled for "harmonization." One may quibble with the *tosafot* and Rosh for harmonizing two seemingly contradictory opinions in the Talmud. But if both opinions are found together in one code by a single author, namely Rambam, then it should be clear that he himself didn't view them as contradictory.

These, then, are the three possible ways to understand the apparent contradiction between Rabbi Eliezer's rule and the statement of the *baraita*: (1) The *baraita*, which limits the law of *kavvana* to *Avot*, simply disagrees with Rabbi Eliezer (geonim quoted by Meiri). (2) Rabbi Eliezer forbade a person to pray unless he could concentrate on all eighteen blessings. But after the fact, if a person didn't have *kavvana* throughout his prayer, it was still a valid prayer as long as he concentrated during *Avot* (Re'ah). (3) Rabbi Eliezer meant that prayer is only forbidden in the first place if a person cannot pay attention during *Avot* specifically. This last opinion was agreed to by the majority of the halakhic authorities (seemingly including Rambam), and was accepted as the halakha (*Orah Hayyim* 101:1).

The only remaining question is *why* the *baraita* only requires *kavvana* for *Avot*. If prayer-without-*kavvana* runs contrary to Torah values, then shouldn't lack of *kavvana* for any of the blessings disqualify a prayer? Despite extensive research, I have only been able to find one authority who addressed this problem directly: Rabbi Abraham, Rambam's son, in his responsa. However, the answer he gives is so basic and rings so true intuitively that, in my opinion, it lays the question to rest:

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14. *Kesef Mishna* assumes that Rambam agreed with the *tosafot* and Rosh. For other commentaries that hold this opinion, see *Yabia Omer*, vol. 3 (end of 8:1), and also Rabbi Yosef Kafih's recent commentary on *Sefer Ahava* (Jerusalem: Mahon Mishnat ha-Rambam, 1984).

My friend Rabbi Robert Klapper correctly pointed out to me that Rambam could very easily be understood like Re'ah. The language he uses in the fourth chapter clearly suggests a situation of *lekhatilla*, i.e., that one may not pray initially without *kavvana*. In the tenth chapter, though, where the demand for *kavvana* was limited to *Avot*, the situation is clearly *bedi'avad*: "One who prayed and did not concentrate must pray again with concentration." I recently saw that Yaakov Blidstein also reads Rambam this way: see *Ha-Tefilla be-Mishnat ha-Hilkhait shel ha-Rambam* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1994), p. 93. This is exactly the position we encountered in our version of Re'ah. However, Re'ah may not have held this position at all (see previous note). Thus, if Rambam did resolve the contradiction this way, then his is a *da'at yahid* (he is alone in holding this opinion).

The rabbis of blessed memory only decreed things that every person would be able to keep. They never made a strict ruling that would become a leniency in reality.<sup>15</sup>

Because if they required a person to concentrate for the entire reading of *Shema* in order to fulfil his obligation, or that he concentrate for every blessing in order to fulfil his obligation to pray, no one would fulfil his obligation to read the *Shema* or pray besides exceptional individuals on rare occasions.

Therefore they decreed the barest possible minimum for fulfilling one's obligation, namely concentration for the first verse in the reading of *Shema* and the first blessing, which is *Avot*, during prayer.<sup>16</sup>

As Rabbi Abraham makes clear in the rest of his responsum, a moral and religious obligation exists to go beyond this minimum requirement, even if a formal halakhic obligation does not. But the crucial point is that Hazal had to make a major concession to basic human limitations regarding frequent and obligatory prayer.

Nor did Hazal choose the first verse of *Shema* and the first blessing of the *Amida* simply because they are at the beginning. Rather, these parts were chosen because each sums up a central idea. The central theme of *Shema* is unconditional and absolute acceptance of God's rule, which is the point of the first verse when we declare Him to be our one God. There is one "overall" concept behind the *Amida* as well, which was described thus by Rabbi Shelomo ibn Adret (known as Rashba, a thirteenth-century Spanish Talmudist):

The first level of *kavvana* that all of Israel can attain is that there is a God whom logic requires to exist who created the world according to His will, gave the Torah to His nation Israel on Sinai, and we belong to Him and serve Him. . . . We thank Him and pray to Him because everything comes from Him and He supervises and watches our actions to exact retribution and to reward us. Every Jew who prays does so according to this *kavvana*, even women. . . .<sup>17</sup>

As Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the contemporary *posek* and a former *Rishon le-Tziyyon* (Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel) pointed out, "one who considers [Rashba's words] will see that most or all of the first blessing in *tefilla* is included in these ideas mentioned by the Rashba." This would seem to be why Hazal required *kavvana* for this blessing in particular.<sup>18</sup>

According to Rabbi Abraham and his father, Rambam, limiting Rabbi

15. In this context, the expression *humra de-atya lidei kula* means that since a very strict decree requiring *kavvana* the entire time would be beyond most people's ability to keep, they would instead treat prayer with invalid "leniency" by not praying at all.

16. *Teshuvot Rabbi Avraham ben ha-Rambam*, no. 62.

17. *Teshuvot ha-Rashba*, no. 423.

18. *Yabia' Omer*, vol. 5 (9:3).

Eliezer's rule to a single blessing was the only concession Hazal made for human frailties during prayer. But according to other authorities whose views we shall study later in this chapter, further concessions had to be made after the period of the Talmud. As we shall see, these later concessions amounted to completely eliminating the practical effect of the halakhic requirement for *kavvana*.

## A REINTERPRETATION OF KAVVANA

What began with Rabbi Eliezer as the apparent disqualification of all prayer without *kavvana*, eventually became limited to the first blessing of the *Amida* (i.e., *Avot*). However, there was one late reaction in the nineteenth century that tried to reverse the trend, at least in theory. Rabbi Hayyim Soloveitchik of Brisk (known by yeshiva students to this day simply as "Rav Hayyim"), in a much-publicized essay on this topic, reinterpreted Rambam's two statements on *kavvana* in a way that would have resulted in a radically new understanding of this halakha, were it to be put into practice. In the second of his famous *Hiddushim* on Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*, Rav Hayyim suggested that Rambam's two rulings were not both simply about "*kavvana*," but about two different types of *kavvana* that really are separate halakhic concepts. I will only describe his point briefly, because so much has been written about it elsewhere (including some strong objections to it).<sup>19</sup> We will be far more concerned about how Rav Hayyim's *hiddush* fits into the historical trend that minimized the halakhic need for *kavvana* than about the validity of the *hiddush* itself.

To understand Rav Hayyim's point, recall Rambam's ruling that "any prayer without *kavvana* is not a prayer." But six chapters later he wrote that if a person only concentrated during the first blessing he need not pray again. Do these two statements contradict each other? According to Rav Hayyim, Rambam's second ruling concerns a special type of *kavvana* that is specific to prayer: in prayer, one must pay attention to the meaning of the words. Although one should try to have such *kavvana* throughout prayer, *tefilla* is invalid only if it is absent during *Avot*, the first blessing.

Rambam's first rule, however, only requires the type of *kavvana* that is a common necessity for all mitzvot: for any mitzva, one must consciously intend to perform that mitzva. For prayer, this means that one must keep in mind that he is fulfilling the commandment to pray by standing before God. If he forgets that he is standing before God because his mind wanders during any of the blessings, then he has uttered words with no intention (in

19. Most recently, see Yitzhak Mirski, *Hegiyonei Halakha be-Inyanei Shabbat u-Mo'adim* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kuk, 1989), pp. 153–155; and Norman Lamm, "Ha-Idana Ein Hozrin Bishvil Hesron Kavvana [Nowadays, We Do Not Repeat for Lack of Concentration]," in *Halakhot ve-Halikhhot* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kuk, 1990), pp. 68–74; and *Yabia Omer*, vol. 3 (8:1). For objections to the *hiddush*, see the sources mentioned in n. 21 below.

halakhic terminology: *mit'assek*), and it is as if he never recited that blessing at all. Therefore, this basic type of *kavvana* is required for the entire *Amida* according to Rav Hayyim, not just for the first blessing.

A humorous anecdote (retold by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz) illustrates Rav Hayyim's idea. An ignorant Jew once showed up at the synagogue on Rosh Hashana. During the service, he shouted all of the prayers with great fervor, including the most difficult or incomprehensible *piyyutim* (liturgical poems) that were recited. While he was yelling "*elu ve-elu be-fetzah mefatzehim*" (or some such line), another Jew came up to him and asked him, "Reb Yid, what excites you so much about *be-fetzah mefatzehim*? You haven't any idea what it means!" The simple Jew responded, "What do I care what's written there in the siddur? All I know is that all the prayers mean one thing: Master of the Universe, help me make a *parnasa* (living)!"<sup>20</sup>

Rabbi Steinsaltz told this story to illustrate how some Jews have a real, obvious belief in the power of prayer, and in a God who responds to prayer. But the story is a fine illustration of Rav Hayyim's distinction as well. The ignorant Jew in the story was quite aware that he stood before God on Rosh Hashana. He had the first, basic kind of *kavvana*. But he completely lacked all of the finer aspects of Rav Hayyim's second, special *kavvana* for prayer, which is to pay attention to the words we say.

Now, Rav Hayyim's distinction should result in a radical stringency regarding the requirement for *kavvana* during prayer. Although he need not pay complete attention to the meaning of the words, if a pray-er forgets, even for a short while, that he is communicating with God, his *tefilla* becomes disqualified according to Rav Hayyim's interpretation of Rambam.

It is easy to object that if Rambam truly meant to create a stringency that went far beyond any other previous rabbinic ruling (as Rav Hayyim thought), he would have at least been more explicit when he formulated his position. And besides that general objection, some twentieth century rabbis (particularly Rabbi Avraham Karelitz, known by the title of his major work as *Hazon Ish*) found textual proofs against how Rav Hayyim understood Rambam in this case.<sup>21</sup> We will not discuss these proofs here, but the reader

20. "Hinuch Litfilla," in Cohn, p. 210.

21. In fact, *Hazon Ish's* proof against Rav Hayyim comes from the very text we began this chapter with. According to Rav Hayyim, the gemara should have concluded that Rabbi Hiyya did pray twice because he didn't concentrate the first time! This would not have contradicted Rabbi Eliezer's rule, according to Rav Hayyim, for the following reason: Rabbi Hiyya prayed the first time because he knew he would be able to focus on standing before God, even though he might not pay attention to the words. And then he prayed again because he didn't have *kavvana* for the words of *Avot* the first time!

The gemara did *not* suggest this conclusion. Hence, the gemara must *not* assume (as Rav Hayyim did) that there are two distinct types of *kavvana*.

Rabbi Yosef quotes further texts that are difficult to explain using Rav Hayyim's theory. (See *Yabia Omer*, vol. 3 [8:1]. He also re-explains *Hazon Ish's* proof in clearer language.) Moreover, Rambam *himself* seems to clarify his own position on this topic

should be aware that the validity of Rav Hayyim's *hiddush* has been strongly questioned by great Torah scholars.

Whatever the merits of his argument, in practical terms Rav Hayyim attempted to expand the centuries-long limitation of *kavvana* to *Avot* so that it would re-include the entire *Amida*. But why was he willing to do that? Would he have encouraged people, in practice, to repeat the *Amida* if they let their minds wander during the latter blessings, even though that would have been contrary to accepted halakhic practice?

### RABBI ELIEZER'S RULE IS NEUTRALIZED IN PRACTICE

This question brings us to another point related to Rav Hayyim's *hiddush*: Even if we accepted his idea, it would have no practical implications for Jewish prayer. This is because of a ruling in the *Shulhan Arukh* (*Orah Hayyim* 98:2) that "in our time" we never neglect *tefilla* for lack of concentration

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in his *Moreh ha-Nevukhim*, and agrees with the position of the *tosafot* and Rosh, not with Rav Hayyim! He wrote (3:51):

The first thing you must begin to do is to keep your thoughts from anything else when you read the *Shema* and when you pray. Do not make do with *kavvana* during *Shema* for [just] the first verse, or for the first blessing during prayer.

This is based on *Hilkhot Keriat Shema* 2:1, where Rambam ruled:

One who reads *Shema* and does not concentrate for the first verse, which is "*Shema Yisrael*," has not fulfilled his obligation. But for the rest, if he did not concentrate he still fulfilled his obligation.

For *Shema* there is no room to make a distinction between two different types of *kavvana*, as Rav Hayyim did. The rule as Rambam expresses it here is simply that *kavvana* is a prerequisite for the first verse of *Shema* and the first blessing of *tefilla*, but not for the rest of either.

For an explanation of the gemara that initially seems similar to Rav Hayyim's distinction (but is really not the same), see *Teshuvot ha-Rashba*, no. 344. Rashba, however, only applies the category of *mit'assek* if a person never intended to fulfil his obligation to pray at all, during any of the prayer. Active *kavvana* is required for the first verse of *Shema* and the first blessing of the *Amida*: one who prays must make sure that he isn't distracted by other matters "so that both his lips and his heart together will ask for mercy, unify God's name, accept the yoke of heaven and praise God" (cf. *Bi'ur Halakha* to 101:1). But for the rest of *tefilla*, even if he thinks about other matters he still fulfils his obligation because Hazal did not require *kavvana* for these parts.

Finally, I was surprised when I found that Rav Hayyim's *hiddush* on *kavvana* was rejected by his grandson, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, of blessed memory. See "Be-Inyan Semikhat Geula le-Tefilla," in *Shiurim le-Zekher Abba Mori*, volume 1 (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kuk), p. 39 no. 5.

because "we don't concentrate much in prayer." Now, such a statement completely eliminates the potential for *kavvana* to have any effect at all on the frequency of prayer. Thus, even though Rabbi Eliezer's ruling is still accepted in principle, its practical force is now completely neutralized. Rav Hayyim's *hiddush*, as well, can have no impact in practice.

We have now come full circle. Two thousand years ago Rabbi Eliezer made a statement which, taken at face value, prohibited any prayer if it could not be fully accompanied by *kavvanat ha-lev*. But the scope of that rule was first limited to the blessing of *Avot* alone, and then entirely eliminated in later times when people supposedly cannot concentrate most of the time. It seems that for all practical purposes, Rabbi Eliezer's rule does not apply today. Nowadays one rarely hears from Jews who pray regularly that they ever failed to recite their prayers because they couldn't concentrate, or repeated them because they didn't do so the first time. Yet none of them would deny that their prayers are entirely devoid of *kavvana* many or most times they pray.

### SOME CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS

Two people, however, did address such questions to Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. (Both were presumably people who normally concentrate during *Avot*.) One asked whether he may repeat *Amida* when he fails to concentrate during *Avot*. Rabbi Moshe Isserles (Rema), who recorded Ashkenazic practices, clearly ruled that this should not be done:

Nowadays we don't repeat prayers for lack of *kavvana*. For if during the repetition it's likely that he still won't concentrate, why should he repeat it? (*Orah Hayyim* 101:1)

But Sephardic Jews are not necessarily bound by this ruling, because Rabbi Yosef Karo did not explicitly forbid such a repetition. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef suggested that despite the ruling in *Orah Hayyim* 98:2 (quoted above), Rabbi Yosef Karo may have felt that when a person *repeats* the *Amida* because he didn't concentrate the first time, he is more likely to make a serious effort regarding *kavvana* than he did the first time (even "nowadays"). Therefore, Rabbi Yosef ruled that the questioner may repeat his prayer.<sup>22</sup>

The other questioner described a case where he was caught on a bus trip, and wouldn't return home until after the time for *minha*. He asked Rabbi Yosef whether he must say *minha* on the bus (even though he could not concentrate on his prayer at all), or if he may wait until he gets home and "make up" his *minha* there instead? (Anyone who has used public transpor-

22. *Yabia' Omer* vol. 3 (8:10-11). Rabbi Yosef concludes that in principle he should repeat his prayer. However, he suggested saying the second prayer on the condition that if it wasn't necessary it should be considered a voluntary prayer ("*nedava 'al tenai*"). See *Yabia' Omer*, vol. 3 (end of no. 8).

tation in Israel knows how hard it is to concentrate on *anything* during these rides!) Rabbi Yosef answered that if he normally has *kavvana* at least for *Avot* and knows that he will do so again when he makes it up at home, then prayer with *kavvana* still supersedes the value of saying *minha* at its proper time. Prayer may not be *cancelled* for lack of *kavvana* “nowadays” but it may be *postponed*. He need not say *minha* on the bus when he can have no *kavvana* whatsoever.<sup>23</sup>

Ashkenazic Jews who feel bound by the ruling of Rema cannot ask either question. And very few Sephardim ask them either, in practice. Yet there are still some instances where the halakhic demand for concentration, as articulated by Rabbi Eliezer, should affect the way all Jews pray.

For instance, today it has become *minhag Yisrael* (common practice) for religious Jews who fly to and from Israel to organize *minyanim* (groups of ten adult male Jews who pray together) at the back of the plane. In fact, I recently heard of a person who suffered significant inconveniences and an extra financial burden so that he could fly on El Al where, he thought, he would find a minyan. However, the plane was entirely filled with Protestant pilgrims, and he was the only Jew!

But are these minyanim justified? Before discussing a halakhic objection to them, it should first be noted that the people involved in them are often extremely rude to the flight crews, and often get in the way of those who have jobs to do. Those who work with Jewish airlines learned long ago to view these minyanim as unavoidable annoyances. There is no doubt that a wonderful *kiddush Hashem* would result if, at the beginning of the flight, someone who wanted to pray with a minyan asked the people in charge to arrange a mutually convenient time for *tefilla*.

Furthermore, these minyanim are crowded and uncomfortable. The *sheli'ah tzibbur* can rarely be heard by those not standing next to him, and non-participants are constantly pushing their way through to use the bathrooms. It is probably for these reasons that the tefillot are rushed on planes. Even people who normally take at least forty-five minutes for *shaharit* rarely spend more than twenty minutes at it on a plane.

It seems that if a person knows that he can concentrate at his seat on a plane, and he is *certain* that he cannot with a minyan at the back, then he should simply pray by himself in his seat. Praying with a minyan is extremely important, but it cannot override the obligation to pray in the first place. According to the *halakhot* we have studied, prayer-without-*kavvana* does *not* fulfil a person's obligation to pray (even if it is with a minyan). Therefore, even though nowadays a person is obligated to pray when he knows he will not have *kavvana*, this cannot justify *deliberately* putting himself in a situation where he will *definitely* not be able to pay attention to his prayers.<sup>24</sup> Rabbi Eliezer's rule that prayer is invalid without

23. Ibid., 9:5.

24. See *Mishna Berura* (quoting *Levush*): “Even though we do not generally concentrate, we still must do whatever is possible” (98:7). As an example, he writes that even today one must not pray in a house that has distracting odors. And if a

*kavvana*, which is still accepted as the basic principle on which these *halakhot* rest, continues to operate.

person is upset it is obvious that even nowadays he should try to clear his mind before he prays (98:6).

Secondly, for what is admittedly an extreme example, see *Mishna Berura* (51:8), who suggests that a person, not having enough clothing to resist the cold, pray at home during the winter if he will not be able to concentrate when he goes to the synagogue because of the cold.

In *Iggerot Moshe* (*Orah Hayyim* 3:7), Rabbi Moshe Feinstein of blessed memory forbade a man to pray at home rather than in a synagogue, even if he felt he could have more *kavvana* at home. At first glance this seems to contradict my position. However, in the airplane case it is not a matter of having *more* or *less* concentration. For many people, praying in the back of a plane allows them to have no *kavvana* whatsoever. This is in addition to the fact that such situations usually constitute *zilzul kevod shamayim*, a disgrace to God and to the *tefilla*.

Rav Moshe specifically wrote that a person should join a minyan, despite having less *kavvana*, only "if he has the necessary *kavvana* to fulfil his obligation when he prays with the community." Thus, his decision would not apply to airplane travellers who feel not just that they will have *more kavvana* in their seats (as per Rav Moshe), but that sitting is the only way they can have *any kavvana* at all! For myself, and I assume for others as well, joining a minyan on an airplane is indeed such a case of deliberately entering a situation where I definitely will not be able to fulfil my minimal halakhic obligation for *kavvana*. This is besides the fact that a crowd in the back of an airplane is not a dignified forum for prayer.

Obviously, the motivating factor in Rav Moshe's decision is the clear halakhic obligation for a person to pray together with the community. But note that a likely factor in Rav Moshe's ruling for this particular case may have been that if people were allowed to pray at home when they felt more *kavvana* there, the entire institution of *tefilla be-tzibbur* (communal prayer) would be in danger. This would fall into place perfectly with my explanation of this halakha later in this chapter. But again, this explanation may not apply on extensive airplane trips, which is a relatively infrequent problem. Such trips are still not part of most people's day to day life.

Again, let me emphasize that I am not suggesting people on airplanes be exempt from prayer entirely, but that they pray in their seats if that is the only way for them to concentrate at all.

Finally, Rav Moshe's statement in the *teshuva* that nowadays *no one* can claim he has *kavvana* goes somewhat beyond the direct meaning of the sources he quotes. These sources all deal with people who, according to talmudic law, are *entirely exempt* from certain mitzvot since they cannot concentrate, but state that nowadays they must perform them regardless. For instance, a bridegroom is exempt from reciting the *Shema* on his wedding night because he will not be able to concentrate. In practice, however, even the bridegroom recites *Shema* because "nowadays, when average people don't concentrate, a bridegroom also reads the *Shema*" (*Orah Hayyim* 70:3). We mentioned the similar rule regarding *tefilla* previously, and we will discuss the entire concept at great length below. Rav Moshe's addition that nowadays *no one* can claim he has true *kavvana* is certainly possible, but it is not a necessary implication of the sources he quoted. It may be that according to Rav Moshe, the halakha reflects an innate and essential inability of people to concentrate during prayer in post-talmudic times. This is in contrast to the way I present the rule in this



## THE FORMAL PRESERVATION OF PRAYER

The principle that overruled Rabbi Eliezer in common practice, namely that “in our time” a person should pray even when he cannot concentrate, raises a huge conceptual problem: How could a later authority have ruled this way, in blatant contradiction to a ruling of Hazal that was accepted by all? After all, Rabbi Eliezer did not rule that a person is simply *exempt* from prayer when his mind is not at ease, but that he is actually *forbidden* to pray. What twist of logic could possibly turn the prohibition into an obligation?<sup>25</sup>

This unusual principle appears numerous times in the writings of the *geonim* and the *rishonim*, but it isn't explained in detail in any extant

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chapter, namely as an unfortunate reality for most people most of the time, but not as an inherent disability which cannot be overcome. That not all agree with the “innate” interpretation (if Rav Moshe himself even held it) is evident from the presentation in *Yabia' Omer*, *ibid*.

25. See Norman Lamm, *ibid.*, for a unique solution to this problem. Rabbi Lamm suggests that the idea of not repeating the *tefilla* when there was no concentration is based on a larger conception of the nature of man and the idea of prayer. He notes that many thinkers, such as Rabbi Yehuda Halevy, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady, and Rav Kuk all held that man is constantly in dialogue with God on some level, even when he doesn't realize it consciously. Thus, even prayers that were seemingly muttered with no intent at all still retain some value in that they “reinforce” this “continual prayer of the soul.”

However, Rambam did not feel that man always has a continual relationship with God on some level. According to him, such a relationship is something that man must strive to achieve, but which doesn't exist automatically. Therefore, if one did not concentrate during his prayers then they have no value at all, and he must repeat them with the proper attitude.

Though Rabbi Lamm's resolution of this problem is a subtle and creative approach by an outstanding Torah scholar (and a man whom I personally have learned much from), I respectfully take issue with it. His solution presupposes that all those who hold that man does *not* have a continual innate relationship with God must also hold that even “nowadays” we *do* repeat prayers that were said without *kavvana*. That assumption is not necessarily true, and could only be proven by showing that there is a consistent correlation between the two issues in the writings of the major authorities on this topic. Though the research has not been done, I strongly suspect that this correlation does not exist. Did Rashba, Ritva, and Ran, whom as we shall see below *did* accept the “nowadays” rule, all *disagree* with Rambam by holding that man has a permanent innate relationship with God?

Furthermore, none of the extant versions of the rule (see note 26 below) suggest that it has anything at all to do with an underlying value that even “careless” prayer possesses. On the contrary, the rule supposes that prayer-without-*kavvana* has no halakhic value in principle (*me-ikkar ha-din*), and that in principle the pray-er must still pray again with *kavvana* in order to fulfil his obligation.

A final objection to Rabbi Lamm's suggestion is that the rule is only thought to apply in post-talmudic later times. But if prayer-without-*kavvana* does indeed have halakhic value because it complements a person's constant, inner connection to God, then why didn't the rule we are discussing apply in talmudic times as well?

source.<sup>26</sup> A typical formulation is found in the commentary of Rabbenu Nissim (known as Ran, fourteenth century Spain):

"Rabbi Elazar said: One who returns from a journey must not pray for three days . . ."—These words were only meant for previous generations, who concentrated regularly [during prayer]. But nowadays, since we don't concentrate regardless, we do not neglect prayer [*ein mevattelin ha-tefilla*] for these reasons.

The question still stands, though. If prayer after a journey is actually forbidden by a rabbinic decree, then it seems that one must not pray

26. The following are the references to this principle, and quotations of it, that I was able to locate:

*Teshuvot ha-Geonim* 89 (Lik?, 1864; reprinted Jerusalem, 1967), p. 29.

*Otzar ha-Geonim* (127, p. 51) on *Eruvin* 65a, about the rule that one doesn't pray for three days after a journey. One version quotes "our teachers," while the other says "but now it is forbidden to be lax about prayer, even for one day."

On *Eruvin* 65a, the commentaries of Ritva (quoting "my teachers"), Rashba (quoting "yesh mefarshim"), Ran, Mordecai (512), *Hagahot Ashri* (on the end of section 5, quoting the Mordecai).

Meiri at the end of the fourth chapter of *Berakhot*, quoting "*gedolei 'olam*."

*Hagahot Maimoniyot* on *Hilkhot Tefilla* 4:15 (no. 20), quoting the *tosafot*.

*Sefer ha-Eshkol* (ed. Auerbach, vol. 1, p. 24), quoting his teachers.

*Tur* (98) quoting the writings of Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg. However, in his responsa Maharam explicitly accepts the rule that one shouldn't pray during the three days after a journey, and says that he himself did this! See no. 201. He also quotes the rule as proper practice in no. 474. (I am unable to explain this contradiction.)

Our rule is codified in *Orah Hayyim* 98:2. But in 101:1 (regarding a person who has already prayed but did not pay attention) the *mehaber* is silent. He apparently relies on what he already pointed out in 98:2, but Rema (based on the *Tur*) explicitly adds, "Now we do not repeat [prayers] for lack of *kavvana*, because he probably will not concentrate during the repetition either. If so, why should he repeat it?" (The fact that the *mehaber* did not explicitly object in 101:1 about the case of repeating a prayer that was said without *kavvana* might be interpreted to give some leeway towards permitting the practice for Sephardim. But see *Yabi'a Omer*, *ibid*.)

*Sefer ha-Eshkol*, *Mordecai*, and *Hagahot Maimoniyot* all point out that the rule forbidding prayer when it is not possible to concentrate still applies to a person who is drunk. He may not pray, and must repeat his prayer if he does. See *Orah Hayyim* 99:1.

For an interesting exception to this rule, see *Sha'arei Teshuva* on *Orah Hayyim* 98:1. He quotes *Ma'amar Mordecai* to the effect that if a person prayed without using "*lashon tahanunim*" (discussed previously in chapter one) he should repeat his *Amida*. This is despite the ruling of the Rema that in our times we do not repeat prayers if they were said without concentration the first time, since we assume that the pray-er will not concentrate the second time either. When it comes to concentration—which requires substantial effort—we do not assume that he will do better the second time. But to say *tahanunim* does not require as much effort, and therefore he should repeat his prayer.

regardless of whether or not he generally has *kavvana*. Ran still seems to be insisting that Jews perform an act which is technically forbidden.

But perhaps when Ran wrote the Hebrew words "*ein mevattelin ha-tefilla*" he wasn't referring to the *specific* prayer that a Jew might skip when his mind wasn't at ease. Instead, "*ha-tefilla*" may refer to the *institution* of prayer. The point would be that in a time when most Jews do not have *kavvana* regularly, the very existence of prayer would be in danger if they skipped praying most of the time. We would instead translate Ran thus: "Since we do not concentrate regardless, we do not *eliminate Prayer* for these reasons." This explanation has been suggested by Rabbi David Hartman.<sup>27</sup>

Both Rashba and his disciple Rabbi Yom Tov ibn Asevilli (known as Ritva), Spanish talmudists like Ran in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, formulate the principle similarly. They write that we no longer skip prayer after a journey, nor at other times when a person's mind isn't at ease, because "it is preferable that Prayer not be annulled [*u-mutav she-lo titbattel ha-tefilla*]." (As I have translated it, the definite article *ha-* refers to the overall institution of prayer, not to the specific prayer being said.) Again, the emphasis seems to be on preserving the very concept of fixed, regular prayer, even in a society whose members don't usually pay attention to the words they recite.

Meiri also worried that exemptions from prayer for lack of concentration could be abused as excuses for people to avoid *tefilla* whenever they are not in the mood for it:

But in these generations, when *kavvana* is not reached easily, a person should try to pray with as much concentration as possible, and he should fear the wrath of [God's] judgement [for not doing so]. In any case, he must not exempt himself with the flimsy excuse that he cannot concentrate! Instead, let him pray, and pay attention as much

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27. *A Living Covenant: The Innovative Spirit in Traditional Judaism* (New York, 1985), pp. 160, 172–173. I came across Hartman's comments on the subject after writing the draft version of this chapter. If anything, the fact that we arrived at the same conclusion independently has served to deepen my conviction that this is, indeed, the true rationale behind the halakhic principle.

My contribution to the discussion remains in showing that there is at least some *textual* basis for our conclusion, specifically in the writings of Ritva, Rashba, and Ran. The concerns expressed by the Meiri and by the opinion quoted in *Otzar ha-Geonim* about laxity in *tefilla* (see previous note) also support our conclusion. It is always better, when suggesting the rationale for a halakha, to show that your suggestion fits the textual evidence.

I have also tried to show how this principle impacts negatively on people's success in achieving *kavvana*, and in chapter twelve I will try to show how it can be applied towards a different approach to the *siddur*.

Hartman suggests and then immediately rejects another rationale for the principle on pp. 172–173.

as he can. A person must always fear heaven, and if he does he will not sin easily.<sup>28</sup>

Meiri makes it clear that even in difficult situations, a person can conjure up *kavvana* if he has enough *yirat shamayim* (awe of God).

However, even if our reading of Ran, Rashba and Ritva is correct, it may still be asked how the "preservation of prayer" can justify an act of prayer that is halakhically forbidden. Based on our reading of their comments, the answer can now be formulated in two ways: First, using halakhic categories one might say that when the rabbis forbade prayer-without-*kavvana*, they only intended it to apply as an occasional prohibition. But they never envisioned it being applied regularly to almost every prayer in a place or time where most Jews rarely have *kavvana*. Their decree does not apply in the first place for such a situation.

Second, in value-centered terms the explanation would be that for fixed prayer to entirely disappear is a much greater loss than the negative act of a single prayer without *kavvana*. This could be because if the regular, fixed prayers vanished, then a person would lose the impetus to pray even when he might have *kavvana*. The continual obligation to pray, even without *kavvana*, guarantees that one will indeed pray during that rare *sha'ah shel hesed* (opportune moment) when his mind and heart are ready to reach out to God. This "value-centered" explanation actually explains the reason behind the "halakhic" explanation. They are two sides of the same coin: The reason the decree only applied in talmudic times is because were it to be applied in post-talmudic times the entire institution of obligatory daily prayer would have been lost. The price for absolutely requiring *kavvana* would have been too high. To my mind, this is the only adequate explanation of the rule.<sup>29</sup>

28. *Beit ha-Bekhora* on the end of the fourth chapter of *Berakhot* (30b).

29. At least two scholars have suggested that the definitions of *kavvana* and the expectations for it grew increasingly difficult over time, and this could be what forced Hazal's absolute demand for *kavvana* to eventually be relaxed during the Middle Ages.

The claim is made by Isaiah Tishby, *Mishnat ha-Zohar*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1982), pp. 248–250, after a survey of medieval writings about prayer and *kavvana*; and by David Hartman, *ibid.*, p. 173, based on the halakhic codes he cites on p. 313 n. 10.

More than any other source, Tishby relied on Rabbenu Bahya ibn Pakuda's *Hovot Ha-Levavot*, whose views on *kavvana* we briefly sampled in chapter one (we will discuss them again more fully in chapter five). On p. 350 n. 17 Tishby responds to a comment in a book by G. Vajda (*L'Amour de Dieu dans la theologie juive du moyen age* [Paris, 1957], p. 93) in the following words: "I doubt that Vajda was correct when he noted that, in principle, there is no great novelty in these words [of Rabbenu Bahya] when they are compared to many statements of Hazal."

On the contrary, this chapter and the previous one demonstrate clearly that Vajda was entirely correct! Actually, the severity of the demand for *kavvana* made by Rabbenu Bahya and other medieval writers, and their assertion that the entire value of prayer lies only in *kavvana*, are no different than numerous statements of Hazal

A similar but not identical point has been repeated by many writers and thinkers in modern times who have discussed the Jewish idea of fixed times for prayer. The common idea they all express is that if a person did not pray several times each day out of a sense of obligation, he would rarely or never turn to God in prayer on his own volition. It is the frequent, prescribed prayers which train a person to pray, helping him learn to feel comfortable with the idea of turning to God and speaking to Him. Furthermore, because a Jew prays to God each day without fail, the possibility is created that during at least some of those times for prayer he will be inspired and will infuse his prayer with *kavvana*. But if he did not pray regularly, it is likely that even during times of inspiration a person would not bring himself to pray.<sup>30</sup>

It is possible to justify the Jewish concept of frequent, regular, obligatory

that we have seen. The only difference is in the way this was expressed; for instance, Bahya's bold comparison of a prayer without *kavvana* to a body without a soul (a corpse) is clearly a new way to *teach* the importance of *kavvana*. But Hazal would have agreed with his sentiments entirely, not viewing them as an exaggeration at all. In fact, there is no reason to assume that they might not have said the same sort of thing themselves.

Of course when it came to *definitions* of *kavvana*, especially from the rational philosophic perspective, Tishby is right that there was a major shift in understanding. Many medieval rationalists (including Rabbenu Bahya) and mystics did indeed define *kavvana* differently than Hazal. But whatever their definitions of *kavvana*, there is no justification for the claim that they placed a higher *value* on it. When they emphasized the absolute centrality of *kavvana* to prayer they said nothing that is not directly reflected in numerous rabbinic statements, many of which we have studied in this chapter.

Hartman's claim is more reasonable. He writes: "The *kavvanah* one should have in prayer is described in far more rigorous and demanding terms in the *Tur*, the *Shulhan Arukh*, and the later code *Hayyei Adam* than in the Talmud." For instance, the total *kavvana* demanded from a person who wants to say a voluntary prayer (*Orah Hayyim* 107:4) is based on a comment by Rosh, not on the Talmud. As opposed to Tishby, Hartman simply claims that while the rabbis of talmudic times also considered *kavvana* to be central to prayer, the *nature* of that *kavvana* was conceived of in less difficult terms than in the Middle Ages. Tishby, on the other hand, claimed that *kavvana* was considered more *essential* for prayer in the Middle Ages than it was in rabbinic times. But even Hartman's claim is not entirely convincing, because there are talmudic sources with "rigorous and demanding" views of *kavvana* as well. For some famous examples, see the mishna and gemara at the beginning of the fifth chapter of *Berakhot* (30b–31a).

30. For instance, see Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Al Mahut ha-Tefilla" in *Bitzaron* 3 (1941): 346 ff., reprinted in Joseph Heinemann, *Hatefilla be-Mahshavat Hazal* (Jerusalem, Amana, 1960). According to Heschel, the true meaning and essence of prayer is that it forces man to concentrate on God, pulling him away from his mundane activities and thoughts. This fits in well with the rabbinic concept of fixed, regular times for prayer because without fixed times, man might not be drawn towards spirituality on a regular basis.

Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik of blessed memory went so far as to claim that frequent obligatory prayer is actually what gives man *permission* to speak to God regularly. Only because the halakha specifically *demand*s him to pray does finite man

prayer entirely on this basis. Though numerous writers have done so, one particularly convenient and well-written example is by Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin, who made the point in his introduction to the siddur and synagogue prayers, *To Pray as a Jew* (which, incidentally, remains the best popular work on that topic in English):

It is true that at times I pray only because it is my duty to obey the Jewish law that requires me to pray. But there are also times that I pray because I sincerely want to pray. These are the times that I want to reach out and talk to my Father in Heaven, to my Maker, the Holy One, blessed be He. These are the times that I want to cry out to the Supreme Being, to communicate with Him in a way that I can communicate with no one else. I cannot see Him, but He is real. He is there!

Such moments come to me only occasionally, but they come. Sometimes it is when I am in distress or when I feel lonely and isolated from all the world. Sometimes it is when I feel anxious about the safety or health of loved ones, or when my people are being threatened. At such moments my cry is likely to be accompanied by a shed tear, a pained heart, a feeling of despair. Sometimes it is when a great sense of relief comes over me, or when truly joyous news exhilarates me and makes me ecstatic. Then my cry is apt to be accompanied by a sense of great exuberance and by a feeling of gratefulness. Whether God will accept my prayers and affirmatively respond to them, I do not know. That he hears my prayers, I firmly believe!

If I did not pray regularly out of a sense of obligation to pray, I do not think that I could really pray at those times when I truly want to do so.<sup>31</sup>

Rabbi Donin's point is well taken, and it illustrates something that is undeniably true for many praying Jews. For Rabbi Donin, saying the prescribed prayers regularly, even without deep sincerity, helps *train* a person to talk to God. This opens the way for a person to pray with *kavvana* at least sometimes. Without the fixed prayers a person would not be used to talking to God, and would not feel confident doing so even when he really wants to. In this view, an occasional prayer "from the heart" is possible only because of the more frequent prescribed prayers, even if the latter are usually not recited with great feeling.

However, one aspect of his claim requires scrutiny. Rabbi Donin began

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ever dare to communicate with God, and he only does so at such times. See "Ra'yonot 'al ha-Tefilla," *Hadarom* 47 (1979): 84–106 (especially 87–89); reprinted in *Ish Ha-halakha: Galuy ve-Nistar* (Jerusalem, 1979), pp. 239–271 (especially 243–245). We will discuss Rabbi Solovietchik's views further in chapter six.

31. Hayim Halevy Donin, *To Pray as a Jew: A Guide to the Prayer Book and the Synagogue Service* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), pp. 3–4.

by admitting that “at times I pray only because it is my duty to obey the Jewish law that requires me to pray.” But does Jewish law truly require him to pray at all times? What about the halakhic premise that any single prayer without *kavvana* is actually a *negative* religious act, one that is technically *forbidden*? (This is something that Rabbi Donin, and others who make the same point, rarely emphasize.) Despite the truth in Rabbi Donin’s argument, the halakhic ideal is clearly for a person to *skip* praying when he cannot have *kavvana*. This is the case even though frequent obligatory prayers undoubtedly serve to train a person to pray and often have the *potential* to be infused with *kavvana*. But when *kavvana* seems too difficult, a prescribed prayer is likely to have the opposite effect, namely: it will train a person to pray by rote, to casually recite words that directly address God Himself! Because of this, at future times when he might have been inspired he will *not* pray with *kavvana*. Thus, with all due respect to Rabbi Donin and others who have made similar arguments, their position does not accurately reflect the *talmudic* position. Rather, for Hazal, a person should pray at prescribed times, even out of a sense of obligation, *but only if he can achieve kavvana* through mental and emotional effort. When *kavvana* is impossible he must not pray.

However, despite the talmudic prohibition against prayer-without-*kavvana*, most halakhic authorities after the Talmud obligated Jews to pray even when they cannot have *kavvana*. The reason for this switch, in my opinion, cannot be anything but what Rabbi Donin proposes: If Jews skipped praying *most* times using the excuse that they have no *kavvana*, then they would never pray with *kavvana* either. Regular fixed prayer would not have survived and sincere prayer, by extension, would not have survived either, because its existence depends in turn on prescribed daily prayer. This seems to be why the practical halakha had to change. To conclude, the argument made by Rabbi Donin and others is *not* cogent for the talmudic/halakhic ideal of prayer *only* with *kavvana*, but it is fully consistent with the unfortunate practical reality of Jewish prayer in post-talmudic halakha. It should be understood in the latter context.

In any case the halakha, which once *forbade* any prayer without *kavvana*, eventually came to *require* such prayer when better prayer proved impossible. This began sometime during the geonic era (roughly the sixth to eleventh centuries).<sup>32</sup> But we also studied the talmudic *baraita* which only required *kavvana* for one blessing if a person cannot concentrate through all of his prayer, and this shows that the halakha’s adjustment to unfortunate realities about fixed prayer began even earlier, in mishnaic times.

The worst aspect of this reality is that the adjustment itself helps to perpetuate rote prayer. In a world where Jews knew that they should only pray when they can have *kavvana*, they more likely experienced proper prayer when they actually did pray. But in times when Jews are taught to pray regardless of whether they will have *kavvana*, the habit of mindless *tefilla* is likely to become ingrained in people’s behavior and because of this they rarely or never achieve *kavvana*. As we mentioned above, one possible

32. See the earlier sources listed in note 26, above.

reason Rabbi Eliezer forbade prayer without *kavvanat ha-lev* is that such prayer tends to lessen the pray-er's awe of standing before God, and thus serves to reduce his inspiration during future prayers that he might offer. This idea also seems to explain the behavior of the rabbis mentioned in *Eruvin* (referred to at the very beginning of this chapter) who did not pray whenever they felt they could not concentrate. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef offered exactly the same justification:

It seems that the earlier ones [i.e., the rabbis of the Talmud] found it convenient to abandon the proper fulfilment of prayer for a limited time so that they could fulfil the mitzva of *kavvana* in every prayer afterwards when their minds were at ease. But if they were to pray without *kavvana* (even besides *Avot*) they would train themselves not to concentrate for the rest of the prayer, and this would cause them to stumble in the future.<sup>33</sup>

The halakha, of course, continues to demand *kavvana* in prayer (even nowadays). As the *Shulhan Arukh* states:

The pray-er must pay attention to the meaning of the words he utters, and envision the Divine Presence before him. He must remove all

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33. *Yabia' Omer*, vol. 3 (8:5). Here at the end of this chapter, in which every section has some basis in the writing of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, is the appropriate time for me to acknowledge my debt to this outstanding scholar (though I have never had the opportunity to meet him personally). To a much greater degree than any other contemporary *posek*, Rabbi Yosef deals thoroughly with the halakhic requirement for *kavvana* in prayer and its accompanying problems in all of their wide-ranging ramifications. I have reviewed his *teshuvot* on prayer countless times since I began investigating the topic of this book, and each review helps me understand the issues involved better and reveals new insights that are directly relevant to the topic at hand. *Yabia' Omer* has had a major impact on my views regarding prayer; a number of chapters in this book draw upon the work in one way or another, but this chapter most of all.

Rabbi Yosef has often been praised for his encyclopedic knowledge of thousands of halakhic works. But in my experience, his greatest gift is not the breadth of his knowledge but his commonsense interpretation of each source he refers to. He reads each one in its own context, pays fresh attention to its actual words, and rarely attempts to force a text into preconceived logical categories or make it fit a certain worldview. Only after reading a source on its own terms does he compare and contrast it to others, finally arriving at his own well considered conclusion with no apologetics, and without attempting to read his own views into the writings of men who would not have agreed with him were they alive to be asked. This is an approach that many Torah scholars would do well to learn from.

Rabbi Yosef's brilliant responsa are indispensable for all Jews, for those who adhere to the Rema no less than those who follow Rabbi Yosef Karo, and regardless of how one feels about his ideological positions or his political activities. May God grant him the opportunity to continue blessing Israel with halakhic guidance for many years to come.



distracting thoughts, so that his thoughts and his intentions remain purely on his prayer. He must consider that were he speaking to a king of flesh and blood he would order his words carefully and pay close attention to them, so that he wouldn't stumble. All the more so before the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed is He, who examines all thoughts!

And this is what the very pious men used to do: They would isolate themselves and pray with care, such that they achieved an exit from the physical world and a strengthening of spiritual power, as they came close to the level of prophecy. So if a foreign thought should come during prayer, one must pause until that thought is gone. And he must think of things that humble his heart, directing it towards his Father in heaven. And one shouldn't think about silly things. (*Orah Hayyim* 98:1)

However, any time a Jew today does not have the mental or emotional stamina to follow this advice, not even for the first blessing, the *Shulhan Arukh* still requires him to pray. Hence, due to human frailties, prayer-without-kavvana became institutionalized in a certain sense. This makes praying with *kavvana*, a difficult enough challenge in its own right, into an even harder task. Rabbinic authorities after the Talmud had to rule as they did in order to preserve the very existence of prayer in Judaism, but it is clear that the resulting situation is far from ideal. The halakhot of *tefilla*, instead, continue to function in an enduring state of *bedi'avad* (an unfortunate concession to reality). It is our great loss that the halakhot which only permit prayer with *kavvana* can no longer function.



## ❧ II ❧

# Kavvana *for Prayer in Jewish Thought*



# What Is Prayer and How Does It Make Sense?

## INTRODUCTION

The two questions making up the title of this chapter are very hard to answer, not because they have never been answered before, but because they have been answered in so many different ways. Many of these ways conflict. The wide spectrum of views on what "*kavvana*" and "prayer" really mean hints at the potential depth and richness of meaningful Jewish prayer. But this very diversity also poses a severe practical problem when it causes many Jews to pray with only a vague notion of why they are doing so, or even with outright confusion.

It is intellectually valuable for a religious Jew to appreciate all of the many different approaches to prayer, understanding each within its own context as a legitimate way to think about *tefilla*. Doing so will be a major goal of the coming chapters. But even a wide-ranging understanding of the possible meanings inherent in prayer will *not* suffice when it comes to actually praying, because prayer is an intense activity which requires absolute commitment and total conviction in one clear direction. Even if a person has a good understanding of the many ways to think about prayer (views which often contradict or exclude one another), this will not enable him to pray with *kavvana*. Rather, he must first draw on what he knows in order to formulate his own personal approach to *kavvana* and the purpose of prayer, and commit himself totally to that approach when he prays. Arriving at a personal approach to prayer should and must be a personal decision; it cannot be dictated by any book. The variety of approaches found throughout history shows that no one solution works for everyone. Instead, the coming chapters will attempt to provide much of the background knowledge necessary for making a well-considered choice on how to approach prayer intellectually, and then supply some general guidelines on how to apply what has been learned.

It would be easiest to begin by saying that there are numerous philoso-

phies of Jewish prayer, using the word "philosophy" loosely to mean an overall attitude or vision. In this sense, there are perhaps as many philosophies of Jewish prayer as there are Jews who pray. At the very least, there are as many definitions of "*kavvana*" as there are philosophies of prayer; the meaning of "*kavvana*" is a function of the general idea of prayer. Because of this, I originally chose "Prayer in Jewish Philosophy" as the title of Part II of this book.

The problem with that title was that some of the most important approaches to prayer cannot be called "philosophies" according to the traditional meaning of the word. The Bible and the Talmud provide the most important conceptual frameworks for Jewish prayer, and yet their kind of prayer cannot be called "philosophic" in the sense of consciously conforming to a specific self-consistent system of rational thought. Similarly, most people would label the kabbalistic and hasidic models of prayer as "mystical" approaches rather than as "philosophies" of prayer. In short, the word "philosophy" is inadequate for expressing the numerous approaches to the idea of prayer that exist in Jewish thought.

Nonetheless, our overall goal should be clear from the two questions in this chapter's title. We will survey the numerous explanations that have been given for why we pray and how we should pray. In all of the numerous views of Jewish prayer without exception, the word "*kavvana*" has always been associated with ideal prayer that serves a meaningful purpose (as opposed to rote recitation). For each approach to prayer we encounter, we will see that the reasons why we pray are inextricably linked to a particular definition of *kavvana* and a certain vision of "ideal" prayer that might not be shared by other views.

In order to narrow the scope of our investigation, we will first have to limit what we mean when we speak of "prayer." This will be our first job in the present chapter, where we will limit prayer to certain specific kinds of speech. Then we will pose a number of very fundamental questions about prayer, questions which will help us target the conceptual basis for each approach to prayer that we encounter later. In short, the present chapter will define what we mean by "prayer" and then raise a number of devastating questions about the very legitimacy of the activity. In this chapter we will only focus on the problems. Then in succeeding chapters we will survey a range of solutions, analyzing numerous and varied approaches to Jewish prayer: Prayer in the Bible and in the Talmud, prayer according to some of the medieval Jewish philosophers, prayer in the kabbala and in hasidut, and prayer according to some contemporary thinkers. Each idea of prayer will have its own unique vision, its own strengths and weaknesses, and its own definition of *kavvana*. At the end we will summarize our more important findings, and try to show what practical lessons can be learned from any and all of the Jewish approaches to prayer.

## WHAT DOES "PRAYER" INCLUDE?

Jewish prayer is usually identified with the book called the "siddur." The siddur itself, however, presents a bewildering variety of texts in terms of their content, themes, styles, and even their languages. The siddur includes

biblical poetry and biblical prose. It contains legal texts in rabbinic Hebrew, rabbinic compositions that mimic biblical Hebrew, and mystical meditations in Aramaic. In the Ashkenazic siddur, complicated medieval poems based on multiple alphabetical acrostics and obscure allusions to rabbinic lore are found alongside simple heartfelt pleas in Yiddish.

A popular definition of Jewish prayer is that it includes anything recited in the synagogue or printed in the siddur. The word "siddur," however, actually means "arrangement," and it is precisely that: a conveniently arranged collection of texts that Jews commonly recite over the course of the year. But not all *recitation* need be considered *prayer*. For example, the siddur contains many halakhic legal texts, as we mentioned; these were included in the siddur so that, by reading them, Jews would fulfil the mitzva to study laws from the Torah each and every day. Specifically, biblical verses and talmudic texts on the laws of sacrifices in the Temple were included because studying the laws of sacrifices took the place of actually offering them after the Temple was destroyed. As those who recite them each morning pray afterwards, "May it be Your will, our God and God of our fathers, that the utterance of our lips be considered, accepted, and pleasing to You as if we had offered the daily sacrifice at its proper time, in its place, and according to its laws." Studying the laws substitutes for fulfilling the laws in the Temple's absence, but "the utterance of our lips" is not necessarily a *prayer*. The texts about these laws are included in the siddur for our *convenience*, because many Jews recite them every day as study. But they are not prayers in which we talk to God.

It is true that the *keva* problems we discussed in earlier chapters affect these study sections just as much as the actual prayers, if not more. As we saw in chapter two, it has been argued that merely knowing you are talking to God is a significant level of *kavvana* for prayer, even if you don't understand the words you are saying. But this cannot be true for halakhic texts like the ones on sacrifices. What is the value in mumbling biblical verses or chapters of the Mishna without learning something from them? It should be obvious that the value is not in recitation, but in understanding the halakhic texts,<sup>1</sup> which are usually more difficult than the prayers themselves. Thus, reciting halakhic texts may engender even worse problems of *keva* than prayer itself does. But they still need not be called "prayer," because when we say them we do not speak to God.

Similarly, most *siddurim* include selected Torah readings, but only because this is an important convenience and not because they are considered prayers. (Why it is so convenient to publish Torah readings in the siddur is obvious to anyone who says *Shaharit* daily in the synagogue with a minyan. Such people take pains to avoid picking an edition of the siddur which does not include Torah readings for weekdays and holidays.) Reading the Torah is a *public mitzva*, and that is why it is done in the synagogue like prayer. But

1. On this, see *Biur Halakha* on *Orah Hayyim* 1 s.v. *U-Parashat*; and *Mishna Berura* 7:2. The same thing is true for recitation of the *Akeda* (see *Mishna Berura* 1:13).

the purpose of reading the Torah is *study*, not *prayer*. Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik of blessed memory has been quoted by his students as saying that when he prays, a person talks to God, while when he studies the Torah, God talks to him. According to this it may be said that the two activities share a reciprocal relationship, but are by no means the same.

Though it is not prayer, listening to the reading of the Torah can be affected by problems of *keva* as well. It may be true that one fulfils his halakhic obligation in a technical sense by merely hearing the Hebrew words, even if he has little appreciation of what they mean. But this does nothing towards achieving the true goal of the decree to read the Torah in public. The anonymous author of *Sefer ha-Hinnukh* wrote that listening to the reading of the Torah requires active preparation if it is to achieve its true purpose:

One of the mitzvot is primary, the basis that all of the others rest on—this is the mitzva to study the Torah. Because through study a person will know the mitzvot and fulfil them. Therefore our sages of blessed memory (*Bava Kama* 82a) decreed that one section of the Torah be read in the place where the people gather, which is the synagogue, every week until they finish the entire book, to awaken the heart of a man regarding the words of the Torah and the mitzvot. And from what we have heard, all of Israel have the custom today to read it in its entirety in one year.

Our sages of blessed memory further obligated every individual Jew to read it every week in his home just as they read it in the place of gathering. This is what they meant when they said (*Berakhot* 8a): “A person must always complete his sections [of the Torah] together with the community”—so that he will be better able to think about the words when he reads them at home.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the true purpose of *public* Torah reading is best achieved alongside *private* preparation on the part of each individual. Public reading has the advantage of reaching the masses, while private preparatory study gives each person the chance to appreciate what is read in the synagogue more deeply. Each complements the other. But in either case, just the physical act of reading the Torah or listening to its words is not really enough—the true goal is understanding. We may conclude that although the reading of the Torah is done in the synagogue, it is not prayer. But like prayer, it shares the unfortunate potential for *keva*.

What has been said here about the siddur's biblical readings and halakhic texts not needing to be considered prayers also applies to other parts. The primary example of this is the *Shema*. Though it is undoubtedly the most prominent text in the siddur, even *Shema* need not be considered a prayer. It is true that countless popular books on Judaism describe the *Shema* as “the most important Jewish prayer” (or something similar along those lines). Such books are correct in the sense that since *Shema* is a biblical

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2. *Sefer ha-Hinnukh*, introduction.



commandment (*mitzva de-oraita*) it is indeed more important than other texts in the siddur which are only rabbinic decrees at best.<sup>3</sup> They are also correct that *Shema* is “the most important” when we consider the millions of martyrs who died with it on their lips. If we loosely define prayer as “texts that are recited in the synagogue” or “things that are read from the siddur,” then *Shema* clearly qualifies as the most important prayer. Indeed, the correct halakhic term for the mitzva of saying *Shema* is always *keriat Shema*, which means the recitation or reading of *Shema*. Therefore, if prayer simply means “recitation,” then *Shema* is the most prominent prayer of all.

But if we consider the matter more closely and define prayer with greater care, we will arrive at a different conclusion. If prayer means talking to God, and if it is usually expressed by addressing Him directly, then *Shema* is very different than prayer. In the halakhic literature, in fact, reading the *Shema* and praying are considered two entirely separate obligations. The truth is that when we consider the *Shema* in terms of *person* (in the grammatical sense) and we ask ourselves “Who is talking to whom in this passage?” the answer is *not* that we are talking to God. Nor is the correct answer that God is talking directly to us! After all, who actually said “Hear, O Israel!” and who was he talking to? In its context in the book of Deuteronomy (6:4–9), it is clear that the *Shema* passage is actually Moses addressing the Jewish people before his death and reminding them what God would require from them when they entered the Land of Israel without him. Moses is the one commanding Israel to “Hear!” him and heed him. Thus, it may be said that God talks to us during *Shema*, but only through His messenger Moses. In this way *Shema* is far more similar to the study of Torah than it is to prayer. In fact, halakhically it is considered a fulfillment of the former mitzva, but not the latter.

This was explicitly pointed out by Rabbi Yitzhak Aramah, author of the commentary on the Torah called *Akedat Yitzhak*. He pointed out that *Shema* is actually “the opposite idea of prayer” because “during prayer one talks with his God” but during *Shema* “he talks to himself in this section in the name of his God.”<sup>4</sup> Prayer means that we talk to God; in the *Shema* He talks to us. They are not the same kind of activity, even if both are recitation from the siddur.

But this does not mean that we need not be concerned with lack of *kavvana* for *Shema*. On the contrary: lack of *kavvana* renders a recitation of *Shema* invalid the same way as prayer, and the same *keva* problems that

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3. Though Rambam held that prayer is a biblical obligation, he defined this as prayer once a day in one's own words, with little formal structure. But the rabbinic prayer-texts are clearly just that—rabbinic obligations, not biblical ones. We will bring up the argument about whether prayer is a biblical obligation once again in chapter four.

4. *Akedat Yitzhak* 58. I was made aware of this reference by Shalom Rosenberg, “Tefilla ve-Hagut Yehudit, Kivvunim u-Ve'ayot” in Cohn, p. 103.

However, problems of “person” can still arise because of the verse “*barukh shem*” which is added, and which does not easily fit into the context of Moses talking to Israel (to ourselves). Consulting the midrashic sources for this custom (see *Devarim Rabba* 2:31, for instance) only deepens the problem instead of lessening it, and I have not been able to come up with a solution that is entirely satisfactory when I say the *Shema*.

have always plagued prayer affect *Shema* as well. Specifically, saying the first verse of *Shema* without *kavvana* renders it invalid in exactly the same way as lack of *kavvana* during the first blessing of the *Amida* invalidates the prayer. And there is no question that *kavvana* is required for the entire *Shema* in principle, just as it is for the entire *Amida*.

The problems of *kavvana* (or the lack thereof) are therefore not limited to prayer. They are equally relevant to *Shema*, as they are to the reading of the Torah and reciting halakhic passages in the siddur (as we said earlier). However, our current concern is not with the negative problem of lack of *kavvana*, but rather with understanding the positive meaning and purpose of talking to God in prayer according to a variety of views. We will try to understand what talking to God really means, what it is supposed to achieve, and most importantly what a person should *feel* when talking to Him. How we define the experience of prayer and its goals will be directly connected to how we understand the concept of *kavvana* for prayer. But it means that we will not focus on issues specifically relating to *Shema* or reading the Torah, to which these specific problems do not relate. When we are done, however, our final definition(s) of *kavvana* will be equally applicable to *Shema*, halakhic texts in the siddur, and Torah readings, as they are to prayer.

But as we saw, not everything in the siddur need be considered a prayer. Hazal, in fact, used the Hebrew word "*tefilla*" and the Aramaic word "*itzelota*" (prayer) in an extremely limited way whenever they wanted to express the halakhic obligation to pray in a technical sense. Whenever the Talmud or Midrash speak of an "obligation" to pray or of "*the prayer*" they invariably mean the specific prayer called the *Amida*. This is the prayer known as *Shemoneh Esrei* (meaning "eighteen blessings") by Ashkenazic Jews, though the name is really a misnomer since the prayer actually has nineteen blessings on weekdays and seven on Sabbath and holidays.<sup>5</sup>

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5. On the issue of the nineteenth blessing, see Heinemann, pp. 141–143 (esp. n. 23); he sums up previous theories, but his own suggestions are unsatisfying. One theory is that in Bavel there were no Christians, and so there was no early need for *birkat ha-minim*. Later, it was no longer possible to "combine" two blessings into one, so they had to add another and ended up with a total of nineteen. Heinemann isn't pleased by this theory; instead he proceeds to point out that there may have been many different customs on possible combinations of two blessings into one when their themes seemed similar or repetitive.

More recently, Ezra Fleischer offered a much simpler alternative: A number of years after the eighteen blessings were "put in order" at Yavneh, it was discovered that the important theme of God's putting down the enemies of Israel was missing, and that there was a strong need for such a blessing. In the land of Israel, the new blessing was added and the blessings for the Davidic dynasty and the rebuilding of Jerusalem—because of their similar and complementary themes—were combined, to preserve a total of eighteen blessings. But in Bavel the Jews were conservative regarding the original order of the blessings and their respective themes, not wanting to make to separate blessings into one. So they added *birkat ha-minim* as the nineteenth blessing, which is how we have received it. See: "Le-Kadmoniyut Tefillot ha-Hova be-Yisrael," *Tarbiz* 59 (1990): 397–441.

However, it should be pointed out that this very limited use of “*tefilla*” for the *Amida* by the rabbis of the Talmud has been exaggerated by some writers. The truth is that both the Talmud and Midrash use “*tefilla*” and “*tzelota*” more broadly for any prayer when man petitions God, as well as for the *Amida*. The very limited sense is reserved for the formal rabbinic obligation to pray, which can only be met by the *Amida*.

If not every text in the siddur is a prayer, then how can we tell what is a prayer and what is not? The feature that usually distinguishes a prayer from other texts is that it addresses God directly. The words *Barukh atta Hashem*—“Blessed are You, Lord” are the most typical feature of all Jewish prayer. When he prays, a Jew talks directly to God: *barukh atta* (“blessed are You”) in the second person. I mean, of course, “second person” in its grammatical sense when one person talks directly to another (such as: “Blessed are You”) as opposed to the indirect “third person” when one talks to a second party about a third (such as: “Blessed is He”).<sup>6</sup> We do not talk to God as “You” in *Shema*, or in the texts on sacrifices, or when we listen to the reading of the Torah. So if addressing God directly is what distinguishes a prayer from other texts, then these are not prayers.

But there is one genre of Jewish prayer that often ignores this principle: Those prayers whose main theme is the *praise* of God (as opposed to petitioning Him or thanking Him) often speak of Him indirectly, in the third person. This feature is usually a result of the unique poetic contexts in which such praise is presented, such as having the *mitpallel* turn to other people, or even to the heavens and the earth, and call on them to praise God. For example: “Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise Him on high. Praise Him, all his angels, praise Him, all His hosts. Praise Him, sun and moon, praise Him, all bright stars. . . .” (Psalms 148:1–3, recited each morning).

Similarly, many psalms of praise often have the *mitpallel* describe men praising God to *each other*, and fall into the third person because of this: “Men shall talk of the might of Your awesome deeds, and I will recount Your greatness. They shall celebrate Your abundant goodness, and sing joyously of Your beneficence: ‘The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in kindness. The Lord is good to all, and His mercy is upon His works’” (from *Ashrei*, Psalms 145:6–9). The last two sentences are men praising God to each other in the third person (“The Lord,” “His mercy,” etc.).

It is not uncommon for poetic prayers praising God to casually switch from the third person to the second person and back again. Many psalms and some *piyyutim* (post-biblical liturgical poems) do this quite often. But even in praise,

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It should be noted that Fleischer’s theory is *not* dependent on his premise that the *Amida* was composed from scratch as an “official” unchanging text. What he says would be just as true if only the themes, not the exact words, of the blessings were ordained at Yavneh. On this, see chapter ten.

6. For a detailed discussion of the wording of the rabbinic liturgical blessings, their basis in the Bible and how they came to be in their present form, see Joseph Heinemann “Defusei he-Berakha ha-Liturgit ve-Hithavutam,” in *Ha-Tefilla bi-Tekufat ha-Tannai’m veka-Amoraim: Tivah u-Defuseha* (Jerusalem, 1984); pp. 52–66.

we often talk to God and praise Him directly: "You turned my lament into dancing, You undid my sackcloth and girded me with joy, that my whole being might sing hymns to You endlessly; O Lord my God, I will praise You forever" (from *Mizmor Shir Hanukkat ha-Bayit*, Psalms 30:12–13).

Thus, whether or not one addresses God and talks to Him directly ("You") is a helpful criterion for determining what parts of the siddur should be called "prayers" and what parts should not. It is not an absolute rule, especially when it comes to prayers of praise, but it is useful as an overall guideline. Of course, this presupposes that we do not simply define prayer as "recitation from the siddur" in the synagogue. Such a loose, liberal definition of prayer is a perfectly valid one. However, when it comes to studying deeper issues about prayer it also proves to be a much less *useful* one. That is why we will adopt a more limited definition, but one which is a great deal more functional.

Therefore, in this chapter and for the rest of this book, we will consider prayer to be a more limited category than "texts recited in the synagogue." We will not include *Shema*, reading the Torah, or the siddur's halakhic texts. Instead, four specific genres of talking to God will be included under the general rubric "prayer" for our purposes. The first three are included because Hazal explicitly declared them to be essential parts of prayer. We will consider these three now, and then add a fourth category immediately afterwards.

The halakhic tradition recognizes three genres of prayer: *shevah* (praise), *bakkasha* (petition), and *hoda'ah* (thanks). These are, of course, the exact thematic sequence of the central prayer, the *Amida*. It starts with three blessings of *shevah* and continues with thirteen different blessings whose content is *bakkasha*, in which Jews plead with God to supply their material and spiritual needs. Finally, the *tefilla* concludes with three blessings of *hoda'ah*, in which man thanks God for all the good he has received in this world. *Shevah*, *bakkasha*, and *hoda'ah* are all essential ways of talking to God and integral parts of prayer. We will discuss each of them, and the philosophical problems that plague them, in the coming chapters.

However, there is also a fourth genre in which man addresses God directly, but which is not technically part of prayer according to the halakha. The Torah obligates each Jew to confess his wrongdoing to God. This is known as *vidduy*, and is part of the process of *teshuva* (repentance). Halakhically, prayer constitutes an obligation that is entirely separate from repentance (and *vidduy*). That is why Rambam, for instance, confines *vidduy* to his *Laws of Repentance*, rather than discussing it in his *Laws of Prayer*. However, in this chapter the words "prayer" and "*tefilla*" will refer to *vidduy* as well for two reasons:

- (1) In accordance with our discussion, *vidduy* will be considered prayer because it addresses God directly in the second person (as do typical rabbinic prayers). If prayer is defined as talking directly to God, then confessing sins to Him obviously fits the pattern as well;

- (2) *Vidduy* will be considered prayer because it follows the conceptual structure of biblical prayer, as we shall see in detail in the next chapter.

Additionally, lack of *kavvana* is an especially grave offense for *vidduy*, even more than for other types of recitation: One sin we confess to on Yom Kippur is "*vidduy peli*," confession coming not from the heart but only from the mouth! When Uriel Simon commented on the lack of meaning in typical Jewish prayer (his full description was cited earlier in chapter one), he perceptively noted that this particular sin is terribly widespread: "Listen to how the words of *vidduy* are quickly swallowed on weekdays, and you know that you are not part of an act of repentance or cleansing."<sup>7</sup> That insincere apologies to God are detrimental should be obvious from an ethical perspective. Honest people who have the custom to recite *vidduy* daily (as is the custom in Israel) will usually admit that they tend to commit this sin every single day. In short, the fact that *vidduy* encounters even worse *keva* problems than halakhic prayer does is an extra motivation to consider it as a fourth genre of prayer, in addition to the other two more convincing reasons we gave.

Our four genres of prayer (as well as the "second person" criterion) are only rough ones, of course. Many tefillot contain elements from more than one category (especially prayers which combine praise of God with thanking Him). And it must be conceded that besides biblical psalms, even rabbinic blessings sometimes switch from the second person to the third person and back.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, what has been said so far should provide enough of a guideline for what sorts of human speech will be meant by "prayer" or "*tefilla*" in our upcoming discussion. In the next chapter, when we begin to survey prayer as it is represented in the Bible and in rabbinic literature, we will only consider the kinds of speech that fall into these guidelines. We will not, however, discuss any other kinds of recitation. For us, prayer will mean any time man talks directly to God.

## PROBLEMS AND PARADOXES: DOES PRAYER MAKE SENSE?

Thus far in this chapter we identified four ways that man talks directly to God: praise, petition, thanksgiving, and confession. We will encounter these genres in our surveys of biblical prayer and rabbinic prayer. But does it really make sense to talk to God in any of these ways? As we shall now see, the idea of "talking to God" raises problems in each of our four genres.

First let us consider the type posing the least serious problem: *hoda'ah* (thanksgiving), which is a basic part of Jewish prayer. But anyone who thinks closely about the idea of thanking God is bound to ask some

7. Simon, *ibid.*

8. For example: "Blessed are You . . . Who brings up bread from the earth." For theories on why this happens see Heinemann, *ibid.*

questions that are both very simple and yet very significant at the same time: "Why does God need me to thank Him? Does He derive any benefit from my thanks?" Though these questions are strong ones, the Jewish response is unequivocal. One of the most basic ethical assumptions in Judaism is that whenever one receives a favor from another, he is duty-bound to acknowledge the source of the good he has received. The rabbinic term for expressing thanks is *hakarat ha-tov*, literally "acknowledging the good." This acknowledgement is not primarily for *giver's* benefit, but is rather a healthy moral response on the part of the *receiver*. Its purpose is not to make the giver feel good by knowing that his gift was well-received (though it may and should accomplish this as well). In fact, when one benefits from another human being, the obligation to acknowledge the source of his gain exists even after the giver's death! *Hakarat ha-tov* is always an obligation, regardless of whether or not the giver himself has need of such thanks. As we say to God in one of the daily morning prayers, "It is our *obligation* to thank You. . . ."

Moreover, the duty to continually express our gratitude to God fits in well with the rabbinic requirement for fixed prayer-times, because the blessings we receive from God, unlike those from other human beings, are continual. In theory we should never stop acknowledging God's gifts, not even for a moment, but of course it wouldn't be possible to live a productive religious life if this was a practical obligation. In place of nonstop thanks, we stop our activities at frequent intervals to acknowledge God's continuous gifts, for only through His gifts are we able to pursue those very same activities. This point about constant gratitude can help us understand a famous expression from the Talmud, where Rabbi Yohanan is quoted as saying, "If only a person would pray all day long!" (*Berakhot* 35a). It seems that Rabbi Yohanan was thinking more of thanks "all day long" than petition, for what would be the religious value in pleading for material needs all day long?<sup>9</sup> In short, it is easy to appreciate the religious and ethical value in thanking God.

When we consider genres of prayer besides *hoda'ah*, however, serious logical inconsistencies begin to arise. Let us tackle *vidduy* (confession) first, which poses a relatively mild problem. As we learned, *vidduy* is not formally prayer in halakhic terms, but is rather a part of the essential mitzva called *teshuva* ("returning" to God, usually translated as "repentance"). Confession does raise some problematic issues, such as: "Why should my confession persuade God to forgive me? Doesn't God know what I have done before I confess?" These are serious questions, and in some ways they are similar to questions that we will soon pose regarding the formal halakhic prayers. But on the whole, these questions may be overlooked because they are only a small aspect of much larger problems challenging the very possibility of

9. I was first alerted to the fact that Rabbi Yohanan's statement fits *hoda'ah* much better than *bakkasha* by Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald in "Prayer," audiocassette no. 2 of his *Crash Course in Basic Judaism* (New York, National Jewish Outreach Program 1991).

repentance. The concept of *teshuva* raises serious dilemmas such as, "How can my actions be erased? Does God rewrite the past?" or "How can God overlook a sin that a man really did commit? Doesn't the possibility of forgiveness compromise God's perfect justice?" All of these questions are far beyond the scope of this book on prayer. For our purposes here, it is enough to simply state that the Torah assumes the possibility of repentance. The questions about *vidduy* fall away when a person accepts the reality of the *teshuva* process, though that process itself raises its own important problems. Furthermore, when we study the "simple" and "rational" ideas of prayer in the coming chapters, we will see that each of them has at least a partial answer to the dilemmas raised by repentance as well.<sup>10</sup>

It is when we consider praising God (*shevah*) that we first encounter profound problems that cannot be dismissed easily. *Shevah* was the subject of heated debate from rabbinic times through the middle ages, and to a certain degree the discussion has continued into modern times as well. It was the very assumption that man is even *capable* of praising God that caused all of the controversy: after all, praise implies describing the object of the praise. How can finite man presume to describe God, who is entirely beyond human understanding? And if he cannot, then is it not blasphemous for him to make the attempt?

Hazal were fully aware of this problem, and it is mentioned in the Talmud (*Berakhot* 33b). The realization that man cannot describe God without avoiding anthropomorphism also caused great consternation about prayer during the Middle Ages; it may be said that this single problem is mostly responsible for Rambam's writing the first part of the *Moreh Nevukhim*! His solution was "*dibbera Torah kilshon benei adam*," i.e., that the Torah uses human analogies that the common people unfortunately take literally; but if these analogous uses of human terms for God are understood correctly it becomes clear that they don't really presume to describe God in human terms. For a typical example, take the biblical word *malei* (to fill). It can mean one physical object going into another and thereby filling it. Or it can mean that a period of time has ended, as in "when her time to give birth was ended" (*va-yimle'u yameha*, literally: "her days were filled"; Genesis 25:24). Its third meaning is perfection: when the Torah says that Bezalel and Oholiab "have been endowed with the skill" (Exodus 35:35), the literal meaning is that they are "filled with skill." What *malei* means here is that they were granted *perfect* (full and complete) skill by God. Of *malei*'s three meanings, Rambam insists that the third is the only one applicable to God. Whenever the Bible speaks of God "filling" a place, it really means that the place is a testimony to God's perfection.<sup>11</sup> Rambam analyzed dozens of other biblical words similarly, in order to show that they don't imply anthropomorphism. Though the common people may think the Bible

10. Readers who are concerned with these difficulties for *teshuva* should see Rabbi Yosef Albo's *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* (4:27) for a direct discussion of the issues involved and a creative solution.

11. *Moreh ha-Nevukhim* 1:19.

"describes" God, that is not really the case. God cannot be described, or even truly praised, in human language and categories. When we understand the Bible correctly, we will see that no anthropomorphic description is really intended, despite the seemingly human language. Anthropomorphisms must be interpreted in a way that is philosophically "kosher." In any case, the problem of anthropomorphism is a serious one for prayer.

However, this problem with *shevah* is not one that is central to most modern thinkers, who seem to be satisfied with an approach akin to Rambam's answer. Also, most analyses of prayer in modern times show a deeper concern with what prayer says about man than what it says about God, as we shall see later in chapter six. Nevertheless, the medieval problem still remains, and even a contemporary person is bound to ask himself if praising God really makes any sense. This question, however, is not limited to praise. Petitioning Him as if He were a human king is no less anthropomorphic than praise. As we shall see, the questions and answers about petition have implications for praise as well.

So let us consider *bakkasha*, the idea of petitioning God for human needs. As we shall soon see, this is an aspect of prayer that was accepted without great difficulty in the Bible and in rabbinic literature. The Bible and the Talmud both considered it completely natural for man to ask God for what he needs. And yet, out of all the genres of prayer, it is *bakkasha* that poses the deepest problems, the questions that most strongly resist fully satisfying answers. When we take an overall look at the *content* of Jewish prayer, it immediately becomes clear that *bakkasha* is the central aspect of *tefilla*. The prayers of biblical characters, as we shall soon see, revolve almost entirely around petition. Rabbinic prayer as embodied in the *Amida* consists of petitions on thirteen different themes in its "middle" blessings, as opposed to just three blessings of praise and three for thanksgiving.

But while petition is the essence of prayer, at the same time it poses the deepest and most fundamental problems about prayer. The most convenient formulation of these problems by an influential rabbinic authority is probably that of the Maharal of Prague. Here is how he posed them:

There are those who ask regarding prayer that if a person deserves God to give him the thing he prays for, why doesn't He give it to him even without prayer? And if he is not deserving of it, then even if he does pray and request it, should it be given to him just because of his prayer?

They have also asked why it is necessary to pray with speech. God knows the thoughts of men, and it should be enough with thought alone.<sup>12</sup>

12. *Netivot Olam, Netiv ha-Avoda*, chap. 2. On the idea that if God knows our thoughts then prayer becomes superfluous, also consider the verse from Isaiah: "Before they pray, I will answer; while they are still speaking, I will respond" (65:24).



Maharal continued by writing that such questions are foolish and tainted by heresy. But he took them seriously enough to immediately suggest a solution for them. Maharal's answer appears later in this book (see reading 7), as do the solutions of several other important thinkers (many of whom raised the very same questions without casting any aspersions on them). But for now it will be sufficient to fully appreciate the scope of these questions and their powerful implications for prayer. The heart of the issue is that the very idea of asking God to do something for us seems to be nonsensical, and not just because it implies an anthropomorphic image of His personality. Consider the idea of *telling* God what we need: If God is all-knowing, then doesn't He know what we are going to ask Him for even before we pray? And if so, then why do we need to pray to Him in the first place?

Maharal's other problem has to do with God's ultimate decision about our request. How can a human being ever influence God's decisions? More specifically, why should the act of prayer affect His decisions? If God has decided that a person's plea ought not be granted, then how can a prayer change that decision? Or if God has decided that a person's desire ought to be granted, then why is prayer necessary for him in the first place?

Maharal's questions are really philosophical paradoxes. As anyone can see, their implications for the very possibility of prayer are devastating. They imply that prayer is a naive illusion at best and a ludicrous activity at worst. The practical import of these questions is so serious that it is really impossible for any person who asks them to pray in the conventional sense unless he somehow first resolves them. Because of this, various philosophic reinterpretations of prayer have been offered as alternatives that avoid the paradoxes and still allow the activity of prayer to continue. When we study these in later chapters, our primary task will be to discover how each philosophy deals with these essential paradoxes of petitionary prayer. But for the moment, before we deal with any of the answers, we must content ourselves with fully understanding the questions.

Besides the philosophical paradoxes, however, there are a number of other serious problems confronting anyone who prays. To begin with, Maharal's paradox could lead to the conclusion that God does not respond to human requests. But even if we solve the problems he raised or simply assume that God responds to human pleas despite our questions, in order to pray we will still need to know when and how God answers prayer, and what sorts of prayers find the most favor in His eyes. For instance: What sorts of things is it right to ask Him for? Should we limit ourselves to our most basic material needs, but not ask for luxuries? Or is it right to ask God to satisfy any whim? Or perhaps we should not disturb Him with our worldly needs at all, but only focus on things of spiritual worth during prayer?

Let us take this a step further. Granting that we may ask God for "worldly" things, when and how will He choose to respond favorably to such a prayer? In other words, are there any criterion for what makes a prayer worthy of being accepted by God? Furthermore, we know that many completely worthy prayers by outstanding spiritual figures have been rejected by God. (The classic example of this is God's rejection of Moses's

plea to enter the Land of Israel.) But why does God sometimes reject our prayers even when both the prayer and the pray-er are completely worthy of being answered? Is God whimsical? And finally, the previous point leads us to a question of practical importance to all of us, since we all have our failings: Should a person petition God even if he is sure he is *not* worthy of having his prayer answered?

Such are the questions often posed regarding *kabbalat ha-tefilla*, the rabbinic term for "acceptance of prayer." They can be summed up by simply asking "What is it right to pray for?" and "When does God answer prayers?" But even after confronting these and similar questions, other problems with the activity of prayer, in addition to the philosophical paradoxes we raised before them, still face a person who wants to pray to God. We will consider them now.

To begin with, some of the ideas of prayer we will study later imply that the significance of *bakkasha* in prayer should be downplayed. (To understand why, just consider that the philosophical paradoxes are mostly about petition; but if one considers praise and thanksgiving to be the only important aspects of prayer, to the exclusion of petition, then the paradoxes fall away. This is the intellectual motivation for the claim that petition is not ideal prayer.) But challenging this assertion is the fact we briefly mentioned above, namely that petition is the most prominent feature of Jewish prayer in terms of its textual content (despite being its most problematic aspect as well). This realization brings up an ambiguity that confronts anyone who prays: What is my purpose in talking to God? Are praise and thanksgiving my primary motivations for talking to Him, or are they just supplements to my petitions?

A second problem with the nature of prayer has to do with one of the terms used for it. It is well known that Hazal called prayer *avoda sheba-lev*, which means the "work" or "service" of the heart. But the meaning of the phrase isn't clear. It is easy enough to understand how one can serve God through outright physical actions, but how can one "serve" Him without actually doing anything? Furthermore, why should an all-powerful God need anyone to perform "services" for Him in the first place?<sup>13</sup>

Leaving the rabbinic term *avoda* aside, consider the actual *format* of rabbinic prayer. First, Judaism emphasizes community prayer as a major value. But this in itself is hard to understand: Why should God respond differently to prayer based on the number of pray-ers? Is there any logical

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13. The idea that prayer is the "service" of God has had an impact on English-speaking Jews who frequent synagogues. The term "services" is borrowed from its use in churches: note the use of the word "service" or especially the plural "services" for a form of worship or religious ceremony in a church or synagogue, as in "evening services will be held. . . ."

Though most traditional English-speaking Jews continue to prefer the Yiddish word "davvening" to the English "services" because of the former's more Jewish flavor and the latter's overly ritualistic connotations, the latter actually fits in better with the Jewish understanding of prayer as somehow being *avodat Hashem* (service of God).

reason for community prayer to be more important or more effective (or simply “better”) than that of an individual?

And finally, Judaism regulates many of the details of prayer. The times for prayer and the structure of what we say to God are both structured and are carried out within limited formats. But should prayer be required at specific times, and should people be made to say specific words to God? In other words, how does the way we pray—the words we say and the laws we follow—relate to the deeper meaning and purpose of prayer?

But the most important ambiguity about the nature of prayer concerns the meaning of the halakhic demand for *kavvana*. In chapter two we saw that Hazal considered prayer without *kavvana* to be meaningless or even an outright sin. But what exactly did they mean when they demanded *kavvana* for prayer? What is a person who has *kavvana* supposed to think or feel? Specifically, does *kavvana* mean consciously thinking the meaning or translation of a prayer (an intellectual exercise)? Or is *kavvana* to earnestly mean what one says (an emotional state)? Or is it some other sort of experience? Answering these questions will be the most important result of surveying the various ideas of prayer in Jewish thought, because each idea we encounter will have its own implications for what “*kavvana*” means.

We have posed numerous questions in the past several pages, and consequential ones at that. I hope that they have made the problematic nature of prayer very clear, but I also hope that I have not scared anyone away from actually *praying* by posing too many hard questions about the activity. The coming chapters will be devoted to examining specific philosophies of Judaism, discovering in the process how each approach deals with prayer in general and with these questions in particular. But before doing so, let us summarize and classify the many questions we have raised so far. Appreciating the ways in which prayer is deeply problematic can be the first step towards understanding it more deeply. In the words of a wise Hebrew saying, “A well-posed question is half an answer.”

We will divide all of our questions about how prayer makes sense into three categories: (a) Paradoxes of Prayer, (b) Questions on the Acceptance of Prayer, and (c) Questions on the Nature of Jewish Prayer. It will be worthwhile for the reader to put this book down and consider his initial, intuitive responses to each of the following questions before going on with his reading.

## How Does Prayer Make Sense?

### *Questions on Prayer in Jewish Thought*

#### *Paradoxes of Prayer*

1. God knows our thoughts and realizes what we need or want even if we do not pray. So why pray?
2. If God decides that a person's wish *ought* to be granted, why must he pray for it?

3. If God decides that a person's wish ought *not* to be granted, how can that person presume to change God's will by praying?

*Questions on the Acceptance of Prayer (kabbalat ha-tefila)*

4. What makes a prayer worthy of being accepted by God?
5. Why are many prayers (even worthy ones) not accepted?
6. Should a person pray if he knows that he is not worthy of having his prayer answered?
7. What things are fitting to pray for?

*Questions on the Nature of Jewish Prayer*

8. Is *bakkasha* (petition) the central aspect of prayer, or are other kinds of prayer really more significant?
9. *Tefilla* is called *'avoda sheba-lev*, meaning "work" or "service" of the heart. But how can you "serve" God in your heart without external actions? And why does God need anyone to "serve" Him?
10. What makes *tefila be-tzibbur* (community prayer) more worthy or more effective than an individual's prayer?
11. Should prayer be required at specific times?
12. Should prayer mean reciting specific texts?
13. Finally, and most important of all, what exactly is *kavvana* for prayer? Is prayer with *kavvana* mainly an intellectual exercise or an emotional experience? What should we think, or feel, or visualize when we pray with *kavvana*?

The following chapters will be devoted to surveying different views (or philosophies) of prayer, and trying to understand how each of them comes to terms with the questions we have posed here. Most significantly, we will learn how the exact idea of "*kavvana*," how we define it and what it means, becomes a direct function of our idea of prayer. Different views on why we pray and how the activity of prayer makes sense have direct consequences for what *kavvana* is.

In addition, we will see how each approach to prayer and *kavvana* has both advantages and drawbacks; no one explanation can deal with all our questions in a fully satisfactory way. First we will see how prayer (especially petitionary prayer) was understood in its conventional sense in the Bible and by Hazal in the Talmud, and whether this understanding can come to terms with our questions; we will especially focus on its seeming inadequacies when it comes to the philosophical paradoxes. Then we will examine alternative notions of prayer that have been proposed in attempts to bypass the paradoxes, and try to evaluate if and how they have been successful practical contributions to meaningful Jewish prayer.

## God and Man in Simple Prayer

### BIBLICAL PRAYER: THE "SOCIAL ANALOGY"

There are many stories in the Bible, and God plays a major role in them. Some might say that God is so important in the Bible because the Bible is a religious book which views God as the Creator and the Lawgiver. This is true, of course, but it does not get to the heart of why God is so prominent in *stories*. After all, the fact that God is the Creator and Lawgiver—an abstract Power or an impersonal Force—does not have to mean He is involved in the day-to-day lives of individuals. And yet that is exactly what the hundreds of stories involving God do imply.

We get to the true heart of the issue when we think of *conversation* in biblical stories. People talk to each other frequently in these stories, as we might expect them to. They also talk to God, and He sometimes talks to them. What this means is that God is not just part of the assumed *background* in biblical stories, He is a major *participant* in them. And like any other participant, He communicates with the other characters in the story. He relates to them and they relate to Him.

The conversation in any narrative is meant to clue us in to the attitudes, ideas, feelings, and natures of the people saying things. The Bible is no different in this sense: by the way biblical characters talk to God, we can learn how they relate to Him. But we have to ask some questions in order to do so: How does a person talk to God? How does he know what to say to Him? What induces God to listen to Him? Studying what people say to God in the Bible can help us answer these questions and give us a clearer understanding of biblical prayer.

In chapter two, when we studied the idea of "*kavana*" in the Bible, I gratefully acknowledged my debt to Moshe Greenberg for his fine research and writing on the topic of biblical prayer. Actually, Greenberg's most important contributions on this topic are rather modest in terms of their

size: an encyclopedia article<sup>1</sup> and a short book<sup>2</sup> (about seventy pages long with the index). But in this case, the excellent quality of the work more than makes up for its lack of volume. The full title of Greenberg's short book is *Biblical Prose Prayer as a Window to the Popular Religion of Ancient Israel*, and although the title is a bit cumbersome the book itself is not. As a written work, it is a lively and interesting adaptation of lecture series Greenberg delivered as visiting professor of Jewish Studies at the University of California, Berkeley (his permanent position is at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem).

This short book is an excellent example of how a serious contribution to academic Jewish scholarship can at the same time have popular religious value. Many excellent teachers of mine continually emphasized that the rigor and integrity of academic research in Jewish studies (especially Bible) should never be compromised to bring it down to the level of people who don't have solid backgrounds in the field. I fully agree. But though this admonition is fully justified, it should never serve as an excuse for deliberately presenting academic research in such a dry and technical fashion that even if it might otherwise have value outside of university classrooms, it will be prevented from doing so! Greenberg's *Biblical Prose Prayer* is a wonderful example of how a thoughtful contribution to academic Jewish scholarship, if it is well-written, can be of value to the wider public without compromising its integrity, and can also convey a direct and meaningful message to committed Jews.

What I will present here is nothing more than a bare-bones summary of Greenberg's thesis, drawing on both the book and the encyclopedia article. I will emphasize the points most relevant to the questions about prayer we raised at the end of the last chapter. By necessity, my brief summary will not and cannot be as complete or persuasive as Greenberg's own presentation. Therefore, I strongly recommend that readers who become convinced (as I have) that a deeper understanding of biblical prayer has the potential to influence our own *tefilla* for the better, read Greenberg's original studies and review them carefully, looking up his biblical references in context.

Let me add one more important disclaimer before summarizing Greenberg's views: I will not attempt a fully "objective" presentation of his thesis (for that, again, the reader can turn directly to his book and encyclopedia article). Instead, I will weave in many of my own ideas so that the direct relevance of Greenberg's material to the problems we have raised will be obvious. With this in mind, let us begin to discuss Greenberg's presentation of the prayers in the Bible.

Which book of the Bible comes to mind when we think of prayer? It is usually the Book of Psalms. The psalms represent the literary genre called *biblical poetry*. For biblical poetry, Greenberg points out that "despite the genuine fervour that pervades the psalms, for the most part, the circum-

1. "Tefilla" in *Encyclopedia Mikra'it*, vol. 8 (Jerusalem, 1981), cols. 896–922. Hereafter: Greenberg, "Tefilla."

2. See above, chapter two, note 5. Hereafter: Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer*.

stances they describe lack particularity; they speak in terms of individual and communal distress and salvation, of God's mercies and wonders in history and nature. Whatever their origin, it seems that they functioned as stock compositions of trained liturgical poets, utilized by individuals and assemblies at temple celebrations . . . it was not the realm of immediate, free invention."<sup>3</sup>

However, the Bible also records extemporaneous prayers uttered by its characters throughout its *narratives*. "Extemporaneous" means that a prayer was uttered because of a specific need, at a particular time, and in a certain situation. Its words reflect the living context in that it was said. In the Bible's prose prayers we meet prayers that arise out of living situations and can not possibly be reapplied (at least not word for word) at any other time, as opposed to the stylized generic texts of the psalms.

There are exactly 150 psalms in the Hebrew Bible. There are also a few other samples of biblical poetry that sound like psalms but are found outside the Book of Psalms, which might be added to their number. A fine example is Hannah's prayer of praise and thanks after she gave birth (1 Samuel 2:1-10). According to the plain meaning of her song (which Rabbi David Kimhi [Radak, 1160-1236], one of the greatest Hebrew grammarians and biblical commentators of the Middle Ages, explained at the end of his study on this passage), it is entirely possible that Hannah simply borrowed a liturgical work commonly sung in the tabernacle at Shilo and adapted it to her own situation.

But instead of focusing on the psalms and similar prayers, Greenberg chose to survey each and every one of the Bible's extemporaneous prayers, which, as we said, are mostly imbedded in prose narratives. He found exactly 140 places where the Bible mentions that a person prayed in some specific situation. Some of these (43 of them, to be exact) give no details at all about what words the *mitpallel* actually said. But the other 97 actually include the words of a prayer. Hannah may again serve us as a fine example: "In her wretchedness, she prayed to the Lord, weeping all the while" when she petitioned Him for a son (1 Samuel 1:10). Then she spoke to God in her own words, pleading with Him about her own personal circumstances: "O Lord of Hosts, if you will look upon the suffering of Your maidservant, and if You will grant Your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to the Lord all the days of his life . . ." (v. 11). Hannah "kept on praying before the Lord" (v. 12), but the Bible does not record everything she said. (The words that *are* recorded are meant to be representative of her entire prayer; these were chosen as part of the narrative because they are necessary to understanding the rest of the story.) In any event, her prayer was clearly extemporaneous. Hannah is the perfect example of how a biblical character could pray extemporaneously when she petitioned God, and then utilize poetry when she thanked God for answering her prayer. As Greenberg takes pains to point out, the two kinds of prayer are not exclusive. Any one person

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3. Ibid., p. 6.

could choose to use either of them, and often did, depending on the circumstances.

In any case, Hannah's prose prayer for a child is just one of the 97 extemporaneous prose prayers Greenberg counted in the Bible, which are nearly two-thirds the number of psalms (97 versus 150). Therefore when studying biblical prayer it is crucial to keep in mind that much of the evidence is to be found *outside* the Book of Psalms.

As we mentioned, the outstanding characteristic of psalms is that they can be applied to a variety of situations faced by people throughout history. Some psalms speak of pain, some of guilt, some of joy and gratitude, while many others express absolute wonder and astonishment at the glory of God and His creation. Though they are thousands of years old, the psalms still give expression to our deepest feelings when they are properly chosen to reflect a person's mood and circumstances, when they are well understood, and when they are recited with *kavvana*. Despite the ascriptions of some psalms to specific circumstances (such as psalm 34: "Of David, when he feigned madness in the presence of Abimelech . . ."), the *contents* of all the psalms (including psalm 34) have been constantly reapplied in numerous contexts throughout history. The psalms exhibit a high level of conscious artistry, and could only have been first composed by an elite group of outstanding poets; but once written, they can be utilized by all.

In contrast, the prose prayers we find embedded in the narrative sections of the Bible use words which closely conform to specific life-situations. This is not to say that biblical prose prayers are entirely "free" utterances in which the biblical character says whatever he wants to God in whatever way he sees fit. Rather, all biblical prose prayer falls into a loose structure, and from *within* that structure prayers are tailored to fit any given situation. Greenberg's first major contribution was to delineate that structure.

What is the common pattern of all biblical prose prayers? Its most meager outlines can be seen in Moses's brief prayer for his sister Miriam to be healed (Numbers 12:13): "O God, pray heal her!" Here we find, using Greenberg's terminology,<sup>4</sup> a short *address* where the *mitpallel* calls on God by name ("O God") and a sparsely worded *petition* ("pray heal her").<sup>5</sup> But besides the address and petition, there is almost always another part which Greenberg calls the "motivation": this "motivation" is biblical prayer's most important factor for discovering its underlying assumptions.

But what exactly does "motivation" mean as part of a prayer? It is not what inspires a person to pray that the term refers to; actually, Greenberg means the exact opposite: "motivation" is supplied by the *mitpallel* when he

4. I will refer to the terms for the structure of biblical prayer as Greenberg's, but in truth some of the structural analysis and the terms are borrowed from Friedrich Heiler, *Prayer: A Study in the History and Psychology of Religion*, trans. and ed. Samuel McComb and J. E. Park (New York: Oxford University Press, reprinted 1958). Greenberg expressed his admiration for Heiler's work in *ibid.*, p. 39.

5. See *ibid.*, pp. 14-15, for some suggestions as to why Moses's prayer for Miriam was so brief. As an alternative to Rashi, Greenberg suggests the brevity "indicates Moses's distaste with the whole affair."



tells God why *He* should answer the prayer. As in any unequal human relationship, when one person needs something from another, the one doing the asking tries to show the one holding the goods that they share a "coincidence of interests" (in Greenberg's words). The needy one has to give the powerful one a reason, a motivation, to accede to the request. This is exactly what happens in biblical prayer: the *mitpallel* respectfully but explicitly tells God why *His* will should correspond to the petition!

For example, take the prayer of the pagan sailors in the story of Jonah: "Oh, please, Lord, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not hold us guilty of killing an innocent person! For You, O Lord, by Your will, have brought this about" (1:14). The "motivation" here is an appeal to fairness: since God brought the storm out of His fury with Jonah, and He has basically forced them to take Jonah's advice and throw him overboard, they should not be held responsible for his death.<sup>6</sup>

God is seen here as the righteous judge, who loves fairness and hates wrong. Similarly, when God was angry about Korah's rebellion, Moses argued, "When one man sins, will you be wrathful with the whole community?" (Numbers 16:22). Abraham made a similar argument in Sodom's favor when he asked God, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" (Genesis 18:25).

Thus, an appeal to God's fairness (or justice) is a sound "motivation" for Him to answer prayer. This motivation, like most others in the Bible, is an appeal to God to fulfil the qualities for which He is well known: "compassionate and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness . . . forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin" (Exodus 34:6-7). An appeal to any of these qualities is valid in a prayer.<sup>7</sup>

That God shows faithfulness (i.e., stable loyalty) to his servants is taken for granted, and may be the motivation for a prayer. For example, Eliezer's prayer for success in his mission to find a wife for Abraham's son: "O Lord, God of my master Abraham, grant me good fortune this day, and deal kindly with my master Abraham" (Genesis 24:12). Eliezer expects God's kindness to be aroused for Abraham, His servant, so He should help a

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6. This is not the only place where the Bible takes it for granted that prayer is a basic part of life for gentiles as well as for Jews. (Though this is the first time these gentiles pray to the God of Israel, they instinctively know how to and do an admirable job of it.) Especially note Isaiah's utopian vision: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (56:7); and also Solomon's request that God answer the prayers of gentiles who come to the Temple (1 Kings 8:41-43).

Though not directly relevant to biblical prayer, it is worth mentioning that several recent rabbinic authorities have stressed that prayer is a meritorious deed for gentiles just as it is for Jews. See *Iggerot Moshe*, *Orah Hayyim* 2:25, and various pronouncements of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe.

7. In his encyclopedia article, Greenberg refers to dozens of biblical verses illustrating the various kinds of motivations used throughout the Bible. Rather than just listing the verse numbers as Greenberg does a large part of the time, we will quote some of them here as examples. But all of the following examples are based on his list of verses.

mission for Abraham's benefit to succeed. Eliezer doesn't pray for himself here; he asks God to intercede for his master. But a person can also invoke God's kindness and loyalty for himself as God's servant, as Hezekiah did when he became dangerously ill: "Please, O Lord, remember how I have walked before You sincerely and wholeheartedly, and have done what is pleasing to You" (2 Kings 20:3).

An appeal to God's faithfulness, His *hesed ve-emet*—His "constancy, reliability, and trustworthiness" in Greenberg's words<sup>8</sup>—can also mean invoking a Divine promise as a motivation, as when Jacob prayed to be saved from Esau, "I fear he may come and strike me down, mothers and children alike. Yet You have said, 'I will deal bountifully with you and make your offspring as the sands of the sea, which are too numerous to count'" (Genesis 32:12–13). Similarly, God promised to redeem the exiled Jews when they repented their sins, so Nehemiah pleaded with God to "be mindful of the promise You gave to Your servant Moses: If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples; but if you turn back to Me, faithfully keep my commandments, even if your dispersed are at the ends of the earth, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place where I have chosen to establish my name" (1:8–9).

That God has shown kindness to one in the past is enough to merit an appeal to His constancy, as in Samson's prayer for water after he defeated the Philistines: "You Yourself have granted this great victory through Your servant; and must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?" (Judges 15:18).<sup>9</sup> Or take Moses's plea for God to spare the Israelites: "Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to Your great kindness, as You have forgiven this people ever since Egypt" (Numbers 14:19). Nehemiah made the same point as an added motivation at the end of the prayer we quoted above: "For they are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and Your mighty hand" (1:10).

When a person feels entirely unworthy, he appeals to God's mercy. As Daniel said to God: "Not because of any merit of ours do we lay our plea before You but because of Your abundant mercies" (9:18). The same idea is found in the psalm which attempts to arouse God's mercy by pointing out how poorly off the pray-er is: "Let Your compassion come swiftly toward us, for we have sunk very low" (79:8).

When it comes to prayers for the entire people, not just for an individual, glorifying God's name is often a motivation. The opposite idea—not to let God's name be defamed—can serve as a prayer's motivation equally well. The best known example of this is Moses's prayer for Israel after the sin of the spies: "If then You slay this people to a man, the nations who have heard Your fame will say, 'It must be because the Lord was powerless to bring that people into the land He had promised them on oath that he slaughtered them in the wilderness'" (Numbers 14: 15–16). Joshua ex-

8. Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer*, p. 14.

9. On the lack of humility toward God reflected in this prayer, see Greenberg, *ibid.*, p. 12.

pressed the same idea when Israel lost the first battle at Ai: "When the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land hear of this, they will turn upon us and wipe out our very name from earth. And what will you do about Your great name?" (7:8-9) These past two examples were of the negative, that God must not allow His name to be disgraced. But urging God to positively glorify His name is also used, as when Hezekiah begs God to save Jerusalem from Sennacherib: "But now, O Lord our God, deliver us from his hands, and let all the kingdoms of the earth know that You alone, O Lord, are God" (2 Kings 19:19). Daniel asks God to redeem the Jews, relying on the same motivation: "O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen, and act without delay for Your sake, O my God; for Your name is attached to Your city and Your people!" (9:19).

"For Your name is attached to Your city and Your people!"—Daniel's words convey what lies behind the many of the prayers invoking God's "name" or asking Him to act "for the sake of your name" (e.g., Jeremiah 14:7,21): that Israel is God's people, and His reputation rides on their fate. But God's name is also connected to His professed qualities, and thus "for Your name" may also be invoked in a personal prayer (as opposed to one for the nation of Israel) such as a prayer for mercy: "For the sake of Your name, O Lord, preserve me; as You are charitable, free me from my distress" (Psalms 143:11).

The last two kinds of "motivations" that Greenberg finds are not related to God's professed qualities, but with the relationship the pray-er shares with Him. The fact that one has chosen to rely on God gives him the right to petition: "Protect me and save me . . . for I have sought refuge in You . . . for I look to You" (Psalms 25:20-21). And especially if one feels he has *not* been faithful to God, a promise to return to His service can be a motivation. Thus, Samuel quoted the Israelites as saying: "We are guilty, for we have forsaken the Lord and worshipped the Baalim and Ashtaroth. Oh, deliver us from our enemies and we will serve You" (1 Samuel 12:10).

There are many different "motivations" in biblical prayers; the few references we cited here are just enough to give a representative idea of the different things a "motivation" can mean, but do come not close to covering all the different motivations used by biblical figures. Our survey of motivations, however, has also taught us something else along the way: it has given us numerous examples of what people pray for in the Bible. We quoted prayers for many different things, including deliverance from danger wrought by the forces of nature, deliverance from human enemies, and deliverance from God's wrath; for saving individuals, cities, and nations; for the ingathering of the exiles, and for God's forgiveness. In Hannah's prayer we saw a woman praying for a child, and Greenberg notes numerous other specific things individuals pray for in the Bible.<sup>10</sup>

The examples we cited also showed us some of the ways people "address" God at the beginning of a prayer; remember that (1) address, (2) petition, and (3) motivation are the basic components of biblical prayer. We

10. Greenberg, "Tefilla," col. 899.

will not go into detail here about how people "address" God in the Bible. But many of the examples of how people address God in the Bible bear a striking similarity to how they address other people. This leads us to Greenberg's next point.

Greenberg's next contribution, after he shows that the essential structure of a biblical prayer consists of addressing God, a petition, and a motivation, is to show how such prayer corresponds to analogous speech in interhuman relationships. To accomplish this he surveys three genres of prayer, his three categories matching the four genres of prayer we delineated in the last chapter (praise, petition, thanksgiving, and confession) but with one exception: Greenberg omits praise. This is simply because Greenberg chose to deal with *extemporaneous* prayer. If we praise God for a particular good, in a specific situation, then it is indeed a prayer of *praise*, but more specifically it is one of *thanks*. Thanks is a kind of praise. Greenberg realizes that general praise of God not arising out a specific context is prayer as well, but not extemporaneous prayer. Such "general" praise is more characteristic of the psalms, but not the prose prayers of the Bible with which he is concerned.

When he surveys the three genres of extemporaneous prayer (confession, petition, and thanks), Greenberg's purpose is to show how both the overall structure and even the specific wording of speech in "religious" contexts (i.e., to God) exactly corresponds to analogous speech in "social" contexts (i.e., to another person). Talking to God is based on how one talks to a person; prayer is based on a "social analogy."

For instance, in prayers of confession the word *hatati* ("I have sinned") is often used. But the exact same word is used numerous times by men in the Bible who confess their wrongdoing to other people, not just to God. Greenberg points out that many translators "secularize" the word *hatati* in those contexts by translating it "I am *guilty*," retaining "I have *sinned*" only for "religious" confessions to God. But if speech to God is modeled after the social analogy of relations between human beings and it retains the meanings of interhuman speech, then this differentiation is not called for. "I have sinned to you" may be just as accurate a translation when *hatati* is said to a human being, despite its "religious" connotations, because the biblical Hebrew word "*hatati*" has precisely the same meaning whether it is said to God or to man. Biblical man speaks to both God and man with the same language, and he means the very same thing by both.

Even the motivation for forgiveness is based on "social" models in confessional prayer. Motivations are included in these prayers because a confession is actually a distinct kind of petition: it is first a petition for reconciliation with the one who has been wronged, and second a request for the consequences of the wrongdoing to be mitigated. The following are examples of confessional prayer, one in an interhuman context and one where man confesses to God. The two examples are striking evidence of the fact that speech to God is viewed the same as speech to man in the Bible.

The first example is when Saul begged David for forgiveness. Though Saul tried to kill David, David spared his life when he had the chance to kill him. This is what Saul said to David afterward (1 Samuel 26:21):

I have sinned! [*hatati*]  
 Come back, my son David,  
 for I will never harm you again,  
 seeing how you have held my life precious this day.  
 Yes, I have been a fool [*hiskalti*],  
 and I have erred so very much.

Saul uses the word *hatati* in an interhuman context; he is talking to David, not to God. But in the second example it is David who says *hatati*, and he is talking to God. The wrong he did was to take a census of the people (cf. 1 Samuel 24:10 = 1 Chronicles 21:8):

I have sinned grievously [*hatati me'od*]  
 in what I have done.  
 Please, O Lord, remit the guilt of Your servant,  
 for I have been very foolish [*niskalti me'od*].

Both Saul and David ask for reconciliation: Saul when he asks David to "come back," and David when he asks God to remit his guilt (so that he can once again enjoy God's favor). Both admit they "sinned" (*hatati*) and that they were "fools" (*hiskalti/niskalti*). David, of course, emphasizes his sin and his foolishness by adding the word *me'od* ("very much") to each, but the basic point is the same. One confesses to God the same way he confesses to man; with the "social analogy" for prayer, "confession" means the same thing in both cases.

But these examples of confession by Saul and David become most striking when it is realized how rare "to act foolishly" is used as a verb in the Bible. Samuel accused Saul of acting foolishly when he did not follow God's command (1 Samuel 13:13) and Hanani the seer accused King Asa of Judah of the same thing for relying on human help instead of on God (2 Chronicles 16:9). Finally, Laban accused Jacob of acting foolishly for fleeing him (Genesis 31:28). Of these three examples, two accuse a person of acting wrongly ("foolishly") toward God, and one accuses a person of acting foolishly toward another person. The only other two examples of the verb being used this way in the entire Bible are the confessions of Saul and David we quoted before. "To act foolishly" is rare; the few times it is used are almost equally divided between accusing a person of wrongdoing God, or another person. In a confession it is used to accuse *oneself* of doing someone else wrong, and the meaning is the same whether that someone is God or another person. What becomes fully clear is that wronging a human and wronging God are thought of (and spoken of) in the same terms, because men relate to God based on a *social analogy* in the Bible.

One last point about confessional prayers: If confessions to God are modeled after petitions for reconciliation to human beings, then it follows that any human being with minimum skill in the area of self-expression should be able to extemporize a prayer to God in this way with little

trouble. Jacob Milgrom<sup>11</sup> pointed out that this common ability is assumed by the Torah itself, which commands that one who brings a guilt-offering (*asham*) "he shall confess the wrong that he has done" (Numbers 5:7). There is no fixed recitation mentioned as there is in other places (such as for bringing first-fruits in Deuteronomy 26:5–10 and for setting aside tithes in vv. 13–16). In addition, it is clear that the confession must match the particular circumstances of the sin. Clearly, the Torah presumes that any normal person is capable of formulating a confession on his own. This is a reasonable presumption only if prayer—speech to God—is modeled human speech.

Having cited numerous petitionary prayers and then discussed prayers of confession, seeing how closely they match speech in interhuman contexts, we are left with prayers of thanks. These should more properly be called blessings, because most prayers of thanks in the Bible build upon the verb "*barukh*." The biblical form of thanks, of course, was later adapted in rabbinic times and used as the basic building-block in the structure of all rabbinic prayer. Rabbinic blessings beginning with the word *barukh*, modeled on the biblical way of expressing thanks, remain the most prominent feature of Jewish prayer to this very day.

In the Bible, *barukh* is typically used either used to thank God or a human being. But even the latter case involves God indirectly. When Boaz tells Ruth "Be blessed before the Lord, my daughter" (Ruth 3:10) he sums up how biblical personalities thank each other: by wishing God's blessing on them (or better yet, by indirectly *asking* God to bless them). The idea of thanking a person is connected to thanking God because, as Greenberg puts it, "Gratitude for a human favor might readily have been coupled with acknowledgement that underlying it was the grace of God."<sup>12</sup>

Now, the meaning of *barukh* is clear enough when it refers to a person: it expresses the wish that the person be blessed by God. But when a biblical character is grateful to God he uses exactly the same verb. What does it mean to say that God is *barukh*? The answer, for Greenberg, is that *barukh*, for God, is a grateful exclamation praising God by saying that He is praised or demanding that He be praised. What this means can be seen from its use as a parallel to *hallel*, praise:

I bless [*avarekha*] the Lord at all times;  
praise of Him [*tehillato*] is ever in my mouth.

Thus blessing God means praising Him. To express gratitude to Him (almost always through "*barukh*") is to praise Him or ask that He be praised. The idea behind the usage is similar, but not identical, to the way one thanks a person; the verb is the same and the intent very close. The difference can be accounted for by the fact that man can only presume to

11. Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer*, pp. 29–30, based on Jacob Milgrom, *Cult and Conscience* (Leiden, 1976), p. 105.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

describe God's praises, not add to them. Obviously, God cannot be "rewarded" for the good that He has done. But when it comes to another person to whom we are grateful, we express our desire that they be rewarded by wishing blessing upon them.<sup>13</sup>

Once again, the way *barukh* is used shows that man speaks to God the same way he speaks to another person, and usually with the same meaning. If we ask how man knows what to say to God, the answer is that speech during prayer is modeled on the *social analogy* of interhuman communication. This explains the *structure* of biblical prayer (address, petition, and motivation), and why in all types of biblical prayer—petition, confession, and thanksgiving—the way one talks to God is exactly the same as he would talk to people in analogous situations.

This fits in perfectly with what we said in chapter two, that simple human sincerity is the essential quality of a "worthy" prayer in the Bible, a prayer that God accepts. We would not expect a human being to respond to a plea if he detected (or even suspected) that the supplicant was not sincere. The same is true of God: for Him to accept a petition, He must know it is sincere. And since He knows the truth in our hearts, He will only accept a prayer when the person saying it really means what he says. Like the structure and wording of biblical prayers, the absolute, uncompromising insistence on *kavvana* is also based on the social analogy. *Kavvana* is for talking to man no less than for talking to God in the Bible.

To say that prayer in the Bible is based on the social analogy of interhuman speech explains the most important biblical Hebrew word for prayer, namely "*tefilla*." The root of the word is *pll*, which means something along the lines of "to judge" in its various forms and contexts in the Bible. The verb takes the reflexive form (*le-)**hitpallel*, which seems to roughly mean "to seek a (favorable) judgement for oneself (from God)." In other words, the supplicant asks God to judge him favorably and mercifully in the face of his dire circumstances. He may also ask God to see the justice of his cause. *Hitpallel* is similar to *hithannen*, which means to "seek favor for oneself (from God)." Both terms are used in the same contexts and with exactly the same connotations.<sup>14</sup> This is the how Radak explained the verbs *hitpallel* and *hithannen* in his biblical dictionary, and he was apparently to the first to do so.<sup>15</sup> Greenberg borrowed the definition from him. Thus, *tefilla*

13. Greenberg suggests that *barukh* could have been applied to pagan gods in the "human" sense (blessed be the god), when it was believed that the gods were subject to outside forces like magic and fate. But when the nonmythological conception of God prevailed in Israel, *barukh* took on the meaning "praised" (pp. 35–36). While this suggestion is plausible, it is certainly not rendered necessary by the biblical evidence.

14. For synonyms of "*tefilla*" in biblical Hebrew, see Solomon's prayer (1 Kings 8:49, 52, 54, 59); the various versions of the midrash on "*Va-Eithannan*" (Deuteronomy 3:23); and Greenberg, "*Tefilla*," col. 897.

15. *Mikhlol*, *hnn* and *pll*. Earlier biblical dictionaries are not clear about the exact meaning of *pll* or what nuance the *hitpaal* form adds to it. On *hnn* Radak pointed out that *hithannen* means the same thing as *hitpallel*: "Their meaning is similar to prayer

basically means asking God to judge oneself with fairness and mercy by helping his cause and granting his request. It is worth pointing out that the English word "prayer" and its cognates in other modern European languages, whose etymological meaning is to ask or plead, convey the same basic idea as the Hebrew word *tefilla*.<sup>16</sup> So the word *tefilla* in the Bible, too, fits into the social analogy quite well: a person pleads with God for his needs, just as he might plead with a human being.

Some readers may feel let down at this point because they think that far from contributing novel ideas, Greenberg's conclusions are obvious. After all, are any other conclusions about the nature of biblical prayer really possible? Can prayer in the Bible be explained any way other than with the social analogy? People's speech to God in the Bible may be patterned after interhuman speech, but why is it important to point this out?

There are two responses to this criticism. First, Greenberg's thesis seems simple and obvious mostly *after* it has been explained. I candidly admit that

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and pleading [*tefilla* and *bakkasha*] . . . the meaning of *va-ethannan* is: "I pleaded with him that He have pity on me." On *pl* Radak explained the meaning of prayer: "The *mitpallel* pleads with Him to judge him mercifully, and not pay attention to the many evil things he has done. The judgement should be that He leaves his sins behind and never recalls them again, as the prophet said, Chastise me, O Lord, but with judgement; Not in Your wrath, lest You reduce me to naught (Jeremiah 10:24)."

Meiri (commentary on Proverbs 15:8) explained *hitpallel* the same way "as all the grammarians agreed" (an apparent reference to Radak, among others).

In semitic languages besides Hebrew, the word for prayer is from a different source entirely. The root has nothing to do with judgement, but with the body's physical position during prayer. The Aramaic root *tzaddi-lammed-vav* and Arabic *salat* mean to bend with one's body (bow).

But Saadya Gaon, in his introduction to his *siddur* (*Siddur Rav Saadya Gaon*, ed. E. Davidson et al. (Jerusalem: Mas, 1970)), pointed out that in biblical Aramaic (Daniel 6:12, 14) the term used as an equivalent for *tefilla* is *ba'e*, which means asking or seeking (p. 4\*). Saadya concludes from this fact and from many other biblical texts that the main meaning of "*tefilla*" is petition (*ibid.*), and that true *kavvana* is when a person speaks to God as a slave would plead to his master for his needs, using similar words (pp. 9–10). He even went out of his way to show that every petition the rabbis showed to be prayer by including it in the *Amida* was indeed considered prayer in the Bible, proving this by citing biblical examples of people praying for the very same things.

Saadya Gaon's points are just one more indication that all medieval Jewish thinkers who were intimately involved with the plain meaning of the biblical text understood the word "*tefilla*" as "asking" or "petition," unlike later rationalists such as Hirsch, whose definition we will study in chapter six.

16. When we study modern thought on prayer in chapter six, we will see that this meaning of "*tefilla*" was rejected, and another one was substituted for it. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, far from being pleased that the German *gebet* (or the English "prayer") and its cognates in other European languages mean "ask" or "request" (or even "speak") and thereby agree with the biblical meaning of "*tefilla*," said that "*tefilla*" means something else entirely and that the European languages miss the point! According to Hirsch, Radak and the medieval biblical scholars missed the point as well.



these points were not entirely clear to me before reading Greenberg. It wasn't that I disagreed with them, but that I simply had no clear idea at all about the conceptual basis of how biblical characters talked to God. Greenberg has clarified this issue with great simplicity, and such utter simplicity (the "ring of truth") is often the best indication that a thesis is solid and correct.

But Greenberg's thesis is important on a more serious level because, as he himself points out, it is precisely the people with the best technical backgrounds in Bible study who have arrived at other conclusions about biblical prayer: "Scholarly appreciation of the embedded prayers in the Hebrew Scriptures has been bedeviled by disabling preconceptions. The arch-devil is the dichotomizing of prayer into spontaneous, free invention on the one hand, and preformulated, prescribed prayers on the other."<sup>17</sup> Some of the best-known authorities in modern biblical scholarship and other scholars of religion rejected the possibility that biblical prayer could have been freely worded, yet conforming to a basic format. This is Greenberg's claim, of course: that in prose prayer, biblical characters used their own words, yet conformed to the basic structure of interhuman speech (address, petition, motivation) and even chose many of the phrases they spoke to God with from the collection of terms that might have been used in analogous human situations. Greenberg quotes five scholars who rejected prayer with a loose structure but no fixed wording in the Bible: Yehezkel Kaufman, Freidrich Heiler, S. Mowinckel, E. Gerstenberger, and Moshe Haran. The first two saw biblical prayer as "free," asserting that it hardened over time; fixed prayers always evolve from free prayers, but are never present in a religion's beginning. The last three scholars reversed Kaufman and Heiler's position, asserting that biblical prayers were composed word for word, with free prayer being a later (and possibly inferior) development. Haran, for instance, speaks of "the general course of the history of prayer, which moves from the fixed stereotype to free prose, and from the formulaic to the spontaneous."<sup>18</sup> In short, some scholars see free prayer developing into fixed prayer throughout the course of history, while other scholars view the process in the reverse. But none of them consider the possibility that the two forms could have coexisted.

As Greenberg describes it, biblical prose prayer is midway between completely free expression and the fixed texts of liturgical prayer. It has some structure, but leaves ample room for personal expression. Furthermore, it existed in the same era and in the same society alongside fixed liturgical prayers, chiefly the psalms. *Both* were important parts of biblical religion and they were contemporary with each other. Both were employed by the same people living in biblical times. The fundamental type of prayer was the prose kind, but in more formal circumstances such as visits to the Holy Temple the very same characters who talk to God on a personal level would complement their prose prayers with the artistry of psalms.

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17. Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer*, p. 38.

18. As cited in *ibid.*, p. 43.

Greenberg sums up his views on the loose structure of biblical prayers and his disagreement with all the above scholars as follows:

"Between" does not mean a point on an evolutionary line between two temporal termini, but a level of speech between others that any speaker might choose at a given time. A visit to a temple—not an everyday occurrence—called for care, thoughtfulness, and perfection in expression that a commoner could supply only by recourse to a temple-poet's prepared text. Such were the psalms; the devout commoner could reach for such tender and profound religious sentiments under the impact of a visit to the temple, but he could never adequately articulate them on his own, and so happily adopted another's expert formulation of them. That is the solid kernel of truth in Haran's position. But sometimes even at a temple, and regularly outside it, our data show that any Israelite might pray on impulse without recourse to prepared texts. Such praying is spontaneous in that it springs from an occasion and its content is freely tailored to circumstances. At the same time it conforms to a conventional pattern of more or less fixed components appearing in a more or less fixed order.<sup>19</sup>

Greenberg rejects the argument that for one to come up with his own words is too much to expect from common people, that it requires too much inventiveness. In his rejection, he relates the capacity for freely worded prayer to our world today: "The extemporized prayers of the Bible require little more capacity that we can observe in ourselves; and this little more is accounted for easily by the traditionality of biblical society. Rural American Protestants at grace can equal in inventiveness most biblical characters at prayer; and the average Arab peasant is probably as adept as David was in extemporizing blessings (and curses). There is something

19. *Ibid.*, p. 45. Greenberg makes it very clear in this passage that he does not see merit in the idea of prayer evolving from spontaneous to fixed over time (or vice versa). Rather, both exist contemporaneously. As an added example of this he cited Heinemann's view of rabbinic prayer as a sequence of prescribed *themes*, while the exact words were left up to the pray-er (pp. 43–44). Heinemann's view, as we shall see in chapter eight, is also the dominant halakhic view.

But it must be clearly stated that Heinemann *himself* did not agree with Greenberg's point. He may have held that spontaneous and fixed prayer could be coeval, as Greenberg does, but he also believed that the rabbinic prayers, which were originally flexible structures, devolved into fixed texts during the millennia after their creation. In this, he is much closer to Heiler than to Greenberg. Heiler asserted that such degeneration was caused by the "growing feeling of uncertainty in regard to the divinity . . . which is set to rest only by fixed formulas," and by "the inability for independent expression" (p. 66 of Heiler). Heinemann would have agreed with this entirely. See chapter eleven for *why* prayer degenerated this way according to Heinemann.

between set ritual prayers and free invention; it is the patterned prayer-speech that we have been describing."<sup>20</sup>

To conclude our survey of Greenberg's ideas, let us say that anyone can pray. All that is called for is a modest ability to express oneself to others, coupled with a desire to speak to God the same way. Hannah "poured out her soul" to God, and any of us can do the same. The "social analogy" means that if you are human, then you can pray.

Greenberg's thesis of the social analogy has a direct bearing on the major questions about prayer we posed earlier in this chapter. For the sake of convenience, let us first address the questions we posed last, which we called "Questions on the Nature of Prayer." (Here and in the coming chapters we will not rigidly adhere to the numbered order in which the questions were raised, so that they can be discussed more easily.) First let us consider the question of whether or not fixed prayers are something that have a value, and whether they should be required. Greenberg's answer, which we just finished discussing, is unequivocal: Since prayer is modeled on the form of interhuman speech it necessarily has some structure, but that structure is loose enough to express a person's feelings in any special context (just like speech to another person). However, when it comes to fixed times for regular prayer by common biblical characters there is no biblical evidence. The most that can be said is that biblical characters tend to pray whenever the same circumstances would warrant similar speech to an effective human authority; they most often pray when they have an overwhelming need, when they are faced by terrible danger, when they have sinned and need forgiveness, or when they have just been blessed by some monumental good. Thus, regarding the question we posed about whether *bakkasha* (petition) is the central aspect of prayer, it may be unequivocally answered that in the Bible most prayers are motivated by a clear need, and consequentially revolve around a petition, though prayers of thanks and psalms of praise are far from uncommon either.

What about our questions on the nature of *kavvana*, and what it means to call prayer a "service" of God? In chapter two we already presented Greenberg's proofs that in the Bible, "*kavvanat ha-lev*" means nothing more than sincerity, the same kind of sincerity that must animate interhuman speech if it is to be moving and convincing in any social context. As for prayer being *avoda*, the service of God, Greenberg shows that any activity showing subservience and loyalty to God can be referred to as *avoda* in the Bible.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the rabbinic declaration that prayer is the "service of the heart" (*avoda sheba-lev*) is a valid extension of biblical usage.

Community prayer—prayer by the nation for the well-being of the nation—is common in the Bible. But unlike in rabbinic prayer, it is not essentially better, more valuable, or more essential than personal prayer. Community prayer is simply a different application of the social analogy: the people petition God together as a nation might petition their king.

20. Ibid., pp. 44–45.

21. Greenberg, "*Tefilla*," cols. 917–918.

Now let us tackle a second group of questions, the ones we initially posed regarding *kabbalat ha-tefila* (the acceptance of prayer). When does God accept prayers in the Bible, and when does He reject them? Greenberg amassed a wealth of information on this topic in his encyclopedia article on prayer. The clearest fact to emerge from the material he collected is that in the Bible *God usually answers prayers*. Prayers that are *not* answered are the exceptions. In fact, for God to remain indifferent to the prayers of his people is an indication of exceptional wrath, and it is a terrible punishment.

Indeed, sometimes God rejects a person's prayer as direct punishment for specific sins, or because his overall way of life is not morally pure. A number of proverbs hint at this idea, for instance, "He who turns a deaf ear to instruction—his prayer is an abomination" (28:9) or "Who stops his ear at the cry of the wretched, he too will call and not be answered" (21:13). These examples will suffice, because long before Greenberg, Sa'adya Gaon collected them along with similar passages to explain why God sometimes rejects prayers; see the first additional reading in the back of this book.

But the most common reason God rejects prayer is, as we said in chapter two, lack of sincerity (*kavvanat ha-lev*). The requirement for sincerity is not really so different from the requirement for moral purity, because one cannot talk to God as His servant and mean it if, at the same time, he flouts His will. So sincerity is the essential element making a prayer or a prayerer worthy of God's answer, just as the same is true in interhuman discourse.

Until now we have explored how prayer in the Bible relates to the questions we initially posed regarding the general nature of prayer and how God responds to particular prayers. But as some readers may have sensed, we have saved the most difficult questions for last. Specifically, how does the concept of prayer as it is presented in the Bible confront the philosophical paradoxes we posed in the last chapter? How would a biblical character whom the Bible records as having prayed respond if we could confront him with the question "God knows what you need or want even if you don't pray. So why pray?" Did people in biblical times have any trouble with the concept of influencing God's decisions through prayer?

The most straightforward response to these questions about biblical prayer has been offered by Shalom Rosenberg in an important article surveying the gamut of intellectual approaches to Jewish prayer. (We will refer to the ideas in his article time and again in this and in the coming chapters.) Using Rosenberg's simple but cogent labels, biblical prayer (as well as rabbinic prayer, which will be our next major topic) may appropriately be called "thinking" prayer, in that it is a conscious activity for which it is possible to discover underlying assumptions. (In fact, clarifying these assumptions was the precisely task that Greenberg accomplished so successfully.) Biblical prayer's underlying assumption is the social analogy, that one can and should talk to God as one would talk to another person. But even though biblical prayer required conscious *thought*, it did not employ *reflection*. The difference between "thought" and "reflection" is the precise difference between pre-philosophic thought and philosophic questioning: "thought" implies ideas and conscious action based on certain assumptions, while "reflection" goes a level deeper by viewing one's very thoughts and

assumptions as objects for questioning, analysis, and possible rejection. In other words, while biblical prayer unquestioningly assumes that prayer to God is given a coherent framework by its being modeled on the social analogy, "reflective" prayer questions the validity of that assumption, and because of this it may conclude that the social analogy should be rejected. To make things easier, "unreflective-thinking" prayer can also be called "simple" or "naive" prayer. By "naive" we mean that such prayer is intellectually innocent because it has not been subjected to a specific type of questioning; we do *not* mean "naive" in the negative sense of being deficient in knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, the biblical character who prayed never considered that human rhetoric might not be relevant to the considerations of an all-knowing God; instead, he simply assumed that his relationship to God paralleled his relationship with any other powerful yet caring human figure. This approach, of course, has a clear advantage and an equally clear disadvantage. On the one hand, such prayer can be a deep and meaningful religious experience for people who don't ask hard questions. But on the other hand, if "naive" prayer is the only model available, anyone who *does* consider the paradoxes of prayer will never be able to pray again and honestly mean what he says.

Since we preceded our discussion of biblical prayer by asking dangerous questions about prayer, however, we are no longer philosophically innocent or naive. Indeed, this dilemma forces any sincerely religious person to choose one of two difficult alternatives: Either he must somehow justify the biblical model for prayer intellectually, or he must discover a valid alternative to it. The latter approach rejecting "simple" prayer and substituting other conceptual models of prayer for the social analogy has been followed by almost all Jews who took the philosophical paradoxes seriously from medieval times until today; we will examine the alternatives they offered later, in chapter five. But first we must ask: Is there any hope in the former approach? Can the "simple" approach to prayer be justified intellectually despite the devastating questions it raises?

Readers to whom this possibility seems appealing will be disappointed in the short term. Unfortunately, we are simply not yet ready to tackle it. Before we do so, we must explore prayer as it was understood by Hazal and reflected in the Talmud. Talmudic prayer is the next major historical phase of Jewish prayer, but it is also the last phase that can be accused of being "simple" or "philosophically naive" because it is fully based on the social analogy. As in the Bible, most of the difficult philosophical problems with petitionary prayer are never explicitly raised in rabbinic literature. Though it differs from biblical prayer because it has precise structure and obligatory rules (as we saw, biblical prayer had very little in terms of formally binding rules and patterns), rabbinic prayer is not substantially different in its basic assumptions about the conceptual nature of prayer. As we shall see,

22. Shalom Rosenberg, "Tefilla ve-Hagut Yehudit-Kivvunim u-Ve'ayot" in Cohn, pp. 85-130.

however, it employs the social analogy in a fresh new way. Only after we discuss rabbinic prayer and compare it to the prayers of the Bible will it be appropriate to suggest an intellectual justification for both of them together, since both assume we talk to God the same way we talk to man.

### RABBINIC PRAYER: THE "SOCIAL ANALOGY" FOR A NATION

Certain halakhic disputes become "famous" among yeshiva students. Out of the countless rabbinic controversies on thousands of topics, it is only these few well-known matters that almost any student of halakha is likely to have both encountered and remember, and regarding which Torah scholars continually offer new insights.

Without a doubt, one of the most famous disputes is the fundamental controversy regarding the source of the halakhic obligation to pray. Rambam asserted that prayer is an obligation imposed by the Torah itself (as opposed to a later rabbinic decree), but his claim was challenged by others who considered it to be rabbinic in its entirety. For those not familiar with the basis of this dispute, we must preface that most rabbinic authorities accept the talmudic statement that the written Torah contains 613 commandments literally.<sup>23</sup> For this reason, many medieval halakhists (including Rambam himself) compiled exact lists of the 613 mitzvot and expanded these lists into influential halakhic codes. But they often differed on how to number the mitzvot so as to arrive at exactly 613.

Rambam counted prayer as one of the 613 mitzvot. He considered prayer to have been fully obligatory during biblical times, no less than offering sacrifices, keeping the Sabbath, or giving tithes. But Ramban (Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman or Nahmanides, 1194–1270, who lived most of his life in Spain) differed; he thought any *obligation* at all to pray regularly was entirely a rabbinic invention. Ramban fully recognized that prayer is a common activity in the Bible, and one which was considered meritorious, but he found no indication in the Torah that there was a *daily obligation* for every person to pray. For Rambam, however, one who does not pray daily is guilty of neglecting a positive commandment of the Torah.<sup>24</sup>

It is possible to read too much into this debate: The fact remains that both Rambam and Ramban agreed that what we think of as Jewish prayers today, i.e., the blessings found in the siddur, are entirely of rabbinic origin. There is little practical difference between them. The dispute over whether the obligation to pray is of biblical or rabbinic origin has only limited

23. For sources who questioned or rejected taking the number literally, see Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Torah Min ha-Shamayim be-Aspaklarya shel ha-Dorot*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: JTS, 1995), p. 151. For a reading of the talmudic passage showing that a contextual reading doesn't necessarily mean taking the number literally, or that it's just Rabbi Simlai's opinion, see E. E. Urbach, *Hazal: Pirkei Emunot ve-De'ot* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984), pp. 301–3.

24. For a detailed discussion of prayer as a positive commandment according to Rambam, see Blidstein (above, chapter two, note 14), pp. 23–33.

relevance to the problem of rote prayer among Jews today, since the type of prayer faced with problems of rote recitation is precisely the rabbinic kind. The reason we have raised the issue here at all is because in our attempt to understand the conceptual basis of rabbinic prayer and its relationship to biblical prayer, Rambam's side in this famous dispute will provide us with an excellent formulation of the uniqueness of rabbinic prayer.

According to all, both Rambam and Ramban, prayer is definitely an obligation (whether biblical or rabbinic). They both recognized that a Jew *must* recite certain prayers at certain times. This fact forced Rambam, because of his belief that prayer in biblical times was no less obligatory, to contrast the two types of prayer and try to show exactly what obligations rabbinic prayer added to its predecessor. This was so that his readers would be able to distinguish those aspects of prayer needed to fulfil the biblical obligation from other elements that are only rabbinic concerns. In other words, Rambam had to show exactly how the *practical* nature of prayer changed between biblical times and the era of the Talmud. If prayer was already an obligation in the Bible, then what new components did the rabbis add to that obligation and why?

We are fortunate that Rambam addressed this question exactly as we have posed it here, because as we enter our discussion of rabbinic prayer immediately following a detailed description of biblical prayer, the most productive way to approach the subject is to focus on the differences between the two rather than their similarities. As will soon become clear, the fundamental assumption that prayer is based on an analogy to interhuman speech and relationships is shared by rabbinic prayer and biblical prayer. Since their conceptual basis is entirely the same, we will only be able to appreciate the uniqueness of rabbinic prayer, whose structure is the basis of all Jewish prayer to this day, by noting what it contributed, i.e., what it added to biblical prayer and how it differs from the latter. Therefore, though they are mostly the same, we will follow Rambam by focusing on their differences.

The very first thing Rambam said about prayer in *Mishneh Torah* is that it is a biblical obligation. Immediately after this, he pointed out what this biblical obligation does *not* include: "The **number** of prayers is not from the Torah, nor is the **content** (*mishneh*)<sup>25</sup> of prayer from the Torah, nor does prayer have a fixed **time** from the Torah." These three prescribed elements—number, content and time—are the essential new points imposed on prayer by the rabbis; they are the unique characteristics of rabbinic prayer from the standpoint of halakhic obligation. They were entirely absent in the kind of prayer initially commanded by the Torah.

What did biblical prayer consist of? Next, Rambam described its three essential components: (1) praise of God, (2) followed by petitions for

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25. I have no doubt whatsoever that Rambam meant "wording" by *mishneh*, as we will see in chapter nine. The reason I translated that word as "content" here is so that the passage will remain neutral regarding the argument of whether the halakha mandates a fixed text, which we will not get to until chapter eight.

whatever one needed, (3) followed by thanking God for whatever one has been blessed with. Every Jew was required to say a prayer containing these three elements at least once every day, at any time during the day, but he might also pray more than once if he so wished. Each prayer might be as long or as short as the *mitpallel* wanted. The only uniform rule was that every Jew had to face towards Jerusalem when he prayed.

After this brief description of biblical prayer, Rambam proceeded to explain the three major components (number, content, and time) that were added to it by Ezra and his court, whom Rambam credits with having instituted the rabbinic type of prayer:

(6) Ezra and his court . . . rose to institute eighteen blessings in order for them [the Jews]. The first three are praise to God, the last three are thanksgiving, and in the middle ones are requests for everything: they are general categories for the needs of each person, and for the needs of the entire community . . .<sup>26</sup>

(7) They also decreed that the number of prayers should be the same as the number of sacrifices: two prayers every day corresponding to the two daily sacrifices, and for every day that has an additional sacrifice (*musaf*) they decreed a third prayer corresponding to the additional sacrifice. The prayer corresponding to the morning sacrifice is called *tefillat ha-shahar*. The prayer corresponding to the daily afternoon sacrifice is called *tefillat minha*. And the prayer corresponding to the additional ones is called *tefillat ha-musafin*.

(8) They also decreed that a person pray one prayer at night, since the limbs of the afternoon sacrifice continued to burn throughout the night, as it says: "The burnt offering itself [shall remain where it is burned all night until morning]" (Leviticus 6:2). This also concurs with the verse: "Evening, morning, and noon I complain and moan, and He hears my voice" (Psalms 55:18). The night prayer is not obligatory like the morning and afternoon prayers. Nevertheless, all of Israel wherever they live are accustomed to say the night prayer, and have accepted it upon themselves as if it were an obligatory prayer.

(9) Similarly, only on the day of the Fast [Yom Kippur] did they decree a prayer after the afternoon prayer close to sunset to add supplications and petitions on that day. This is the prayer called *tefillat ne'ila*, meaning that the gates of heaven are closing with the setting sun, since this prayer is only said close to sunset.

(10) Thus we find that there are three daily prayers: *Arvit*, *Shaharit*, and *Minha*. On Sabbaths, holidays, and *Rosh Hodesh* [the New Moon

26. Saadya Gaon also wrote that the eighteen blessings are general categories covering every conceivable need in his introduction to his *Siddur*, p. 6. However, according to the opinion held by some that the petitions of the *Amida* were chosen because they were *national* needs (there can be no argument that they are stated as such), there will still be a great void that must be filled by going beyond the text to express personal needs. On this, see chapters eight and twelve.



at the beginning of the month] there are four: the three daily ones plus *musaf*. And on *Yom ha-Kippurim* there are five: these four and the *ne'ila* prayer.

(11) We may not eliminate any of these prayers, nor may we add to them. If a person wants to pray all day long he has permission to do so, but all those prayers that he adds will be as if he offers a voluntary sacrifice. Therefore he must add something new [*yehaddesh davar*] relating to the theme of the blessing in every one of the middle blessings, though if he only adds something new in one blessing it is enough to show that the prayer is a voluntary one and not an obligation. But we never add or subtract anything from the first three blessings or the last three blessings, nor do we change anything in them.

(12) The community does not say a voluntary prayer because the community cannot offer a voluntary sacrifice. Nor should an individual say *musaf* twice, once because of the day's obligation and once as a voluntary prayer, because a *musaf* sacrifice cannot be freely offered. Some of the *geonim* [Babylonian authorities] ruled that one may not say a voluntary prayer on Sabbaths and holidays because may not offer a voluntary sacrifice [on those days] but only the obligatory sacrifices of the day.

Careful readers will have noticed that of the three new elements contained in rabbinic prayer (number, content, and time), Rambam chose to explain *content* first in paragraph 6. The central topic of rest of the passage (which is actually the rest of the first chapter in *Hilkhot Tefilla*) is the *number* of required prayers, and it also mentions their times. Rambam explained the content and times for prayer more fully in the following chapters: chapter two is devoted to a more detailed explanation of prayers' structure and content, while chapter three deals with the proper times during the day to say them.

Readers who have previously studied this passage also must have noticed that I omitted a famous statement in my citation of paragraph 6. I purposely omitted Rambam's theory about why, historically, fixing the content of prayer became necessary. (In short, Rambam wrote that the returnees to Zion from the Babylonian exile could no longer express themselves in Hebrew fluently, so Ezra and his court composed a clear and simple Hebrew prayer for them.) The theory is not relevant here because our goal is to arrive at an objective conclusion about *how* rabbinic prayer differed from biblical prayer, but Rambam's historical justification only addresses *why* prayer had to be fixed. What actually happened is of more concern here than when and why it happened. (This is also why we are not now addressing the debate among modern scholars over when and why rabbinic prayer originated. Instead, we are only addressing what it consisted of. These historical matters will be discussed in chapters eight through ten.) Additionally, Rambam's theory is only valid according to certain halakhic positions that he held regarding the binding nature of Ezra's prayer-text, but it cannot explain the emergence of rabbinic prayer

according to those authorities who disagreed with his halakhic rulings. (We will introduce these other views in chapter eight.) Thus, Rambam's speculation is a *subjective* theory in line with his own views of prayer, not an agreed-upon description of how and why rabbinic prayer began.

Furthermore, Rambam's theory is relevant to one aspect of prayer: its *content*. It is entirely irrelevant when it comes to explaining why the *number* of prayers and their *times* had to be fixed. In this section we will suggest a single motivation with the power to explain all three aspects of rabbinic prayer at once; this suggestion will provide a valid model for understanding the opinions of those post-talmudic authorities who understood certain halakhot of prayer differently than Rambam. In short, Rambam's theory of rabbinic prayer's origin is limited to explaining one particular aspect of rabbinic prayer according to his own halakhic views; this is why we have not cited it here. Our full discussion of Rambam's theory about the reasons for the creation of prayer with fixed content will be in chapter nine.

In contrast, Rambam's simple delineation of number, content, and time as the three new essential obligations imposed in halakhic prayer is something that can be agreed upon by all. No scholar striving for a clear and objective description of the kind of prayer reflected in the Talmud could do better. Our task now will be to better understand these three elements and see how they impact our understanding of prayer from the biblical model based on the social analogy.

Let us begin with the last topic Rambam mentioned, namely the categorization of every prayer and sacrifice as either voluntary or obligatory. In the Bible, all *communal* sacrifices were obligatory. The *kohanim* (priests) offered two regular sacrifices every day on behalf of the entire people of Israel, and additional ones on special days.<sup>27</sup> But the *kohanim* were forbidden to offer the public daily sacrifice a third time. Only *individuals* were encouraged to come to the Temple and offer private *voluntary* sacrifices as homage to God whenever they wished.

According to Rambam, the rabbinic prayers work according to exactly the same scheme as the sacrifices: the *obligatory* community prayers are obligatory at precisely the same times as the obligatory sacrifices of the nation. Just as it was forbidden to add extra communal sacrifices not commanded by the Torah, it is also forbidden to add new halakhic prayers to the ones that already exist. But just as an individual could bring a voluntary sacrifice when he felt moved to do so, he nowadays may say an extra prayer as long as it is clearly a voluntary response to a personal need, not because he considers it an obligation. A person who chooses to do this must make the voluntary nature of his extra prayer clear by adding the new personal petitions which led him to say it (paragraph 11).

This also explains the basis for the *number* of prayers required; the required number corresponds to the number of obligatory sacrifices in the Temple. Rambam also hinted (in paragraph 6) that the *times* for prayer

27. That the sacrifices were on the behalf of the entire people of Israel was reflected in the institution of *Ma'amadot*, including representatives from every place.

similarly correspond to the times for their corresponding sacrifices. (Rambam explained the detailed rules about these required times in his third chapter of *Hilkhot Tefilla*, as we mentioned, but these details do not concern us here.) Now, some readers may quibble that *time* and *number* really amount to the same thing: To say that one must pray at certain times every day automatically means that he must pray a certain number of times. So why distinguish between time and number?

This objection would carry weight if the Talmud (followed of course by Rambam) had not explicitly shown that the *number* of prayers is *not* determined by their time schedule. What this means is that there are two separate *mitzvot* regarding prayer: (1) to say a particular prayer, and (2) to say it at the right time of day. This is made clear by considering the practical difference between the two: When one involuntarily or inadvertently misses a prayer during its proper time, he is obligated to make it up later, even though the time has passed! If one missed *Shaharit*, for example, he can pray a second prayer after *Minha* to make up for the loss, and he gains the merit of having said *Shaharit*! The gemara points out that in this case he only gains the merit of having said the prayer, *sekhar tefilla*, but he has unfortunately lost the merit of praying at the proper time, *sekhar tefilla bizmanah*. So when Rambam said that rabbinic prayer adds the element of *number*, he was referring to the mitzva of *tefilla* three times a day. But when he said that rabbinic prayer has the element of *time*, he meant the mitzva of *tefilla bizmanah*. Both of these elements were completely absent in biblical prayer, and were introduced by Hazal in addition to the content of the blessings.

The distinction between the *times* for prayers and their total *number* may still seem trivial to some. How is it relevant to the more significant issue of determining the conceptual basis of rabbinic prayer? Actually, this seemingly unimportant distinction points to what may be the most important realization about the deeper meaning of rabbinic prayer. Let me explain.

We have already mentioned that the numbers and times for halakhic prayer are based on the numbers and times for sacrifices. We also mentioned the rule that one can "make up" a missed prayer even after its official time has passed. Some anonymous students in the Talmud (*Berakhot* 26a) realized that there was an implicit contradiction between these two points, and therefore posed the following question to their teacher: Can one make up a prayer even after the time when its corresponding sacrifice would no longer be acceptable? Specifically, can one still "make up" *Minha* (the afternoon prayer) after the sun has set and the day is over? The corresponding sacrifice would be unacceptable at that time. (The talmudic phrase for this has become an oft-quoted Hebrew saying: "*avar yomo battel korbano*," which eventually became a general way of saying that work cannot be made up after the deadline.)

This question forced the Talmud to make a clear choice between two options. On the one hand, since obligatory prayer was instituted according to the sacrifices, it would seem that *Minha* cannot be made up after dark. But on the other hand, the essential nature of prayer is not that of an

outward activity that must be performed according to rigid rules. Rather, prayer is *rahamei*, a plea to God for mercy. Such a plea should never be limited to certain times!

The Talmud was thus forced to define the essential nature of prayer: Is it more the result of *outside obligations* and rules, or of a personal *inner need*? The answer given in the name of Rabbi Yohanan leaves no room for doubt (and the Talmud records no debate on this topic). For Rabbi Yohanan it is clear that prayer itself is *not* essentially dependent on the times of the sacrifices, and therefore one can still pray even after these times have passed. The time requirement based on the Temple sacrifices is imposed on rabbinic prayer from the *outside* and is *not* part of its essential nature. True prayer, even true rabbinic prayer, is more concerned with the need to speak to God than rules about time. Prayer is thus a fundamentally different kind of activity from offering a sacrifice.

So despite the formality of rabbinic prayer and its numerous rules, Hazal still considered the essential purpose of prayer to be the same as it was in the Bible. Prayer is *rahamei*, a plea to God for mercy, and this essential characteristic is even strong enough to overrule one of the basic regulations of rabbinic prayer, that its times are based on the Temple sacrifices. Prayer is to plead with God motivated by an inner need; the rabbinic rules supplement this, but do not change its essential nature.

Actually, the Talmud records two different opinions on prayer's relationship to the institution of sacrifice (*Berakhot* 26b). Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said that prayer was decreed corresponding to the sacrifices, and is able to prove it by showing that the required numbers and times of prayers are exactly the same as the sacrifices. (Rabbi Yehoshua's statement is the source for the passage by Rambam that we studied earlier.) Rabbi Yose, however, said that praying morning, afternoon, and night was instituted by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob respectively, long before God told the laws of the sacrifices to Moses. Though he proves that the three patriarchs prayed at specific times of the day through a midrashic reading of three biblical verses, even a *peshat* (plain) reading of the Bible shows that these three men prayed quite often, and Rabbi Yose must be correct that regular prayer is older than the laws of the communal sacrifices.

But the discussion between Rabbi Yose and Rabbi Yehoshua is not really an argument at all. There is no disagreement; rather, each one simply stresses one aspect of rabbinic prayer that the other has no choice but to agree with. Rabbi Yehoshua emphasizes that the rules governing daily prayer are based on the sacrifices, but he has no reason to deny that the former existed even without the latter. And the *gemara* explicitly says that even though the daily prayers were first instituted by the patriarchs according to Rabbi Yose, he must admit that their times were later fixed by the rabbis according to the sacrifices. (This is why *musaf*, the fourth prayer, exists according to Rabbi Yehoshua.) The fact that Rambam codifies Rabbi Yehoshua's opinion in the passage we cited above and then later accepts

Rabbi Yose's in a different section (*Laws of Kings* 9:1) clearly shows that he didn't consider these two talmudic opinions to be mutually exclusive.<sup>28</sup>

Our conclusion must be as follows: The rabbis of the Talmud certainly did not see themselves as the *creators* of daily prayer. They drew their basic concept of prayer from the Bible. What they did was to *formalize* prayer, making it subject to numerous rules derived from the Temple sacrifices. But they also realized that their formalities for prayer were imposed from the outside, and that sincere prayer (*rahamei*) existed unbounded by time long before the formal rabbinic ones, and still has great value even if it does not operate according to the formal rules based on the sacrifices.

But if prayer is essentially *rahamei*, why were these rules made in the first place? Why weren't Hazal content with informal prayers of the biblical kind? And if the rules had to be made for some reason, why were they linked to the sacrifices in the Temple? As we read above, Rambam did offer a reason for fixing the *content* of prayer, but when it came to the fixing the number and times of prayer he simply stated that they were based on the sacrifices and didn't bother to explain why. Did he feel that the reason was obvious?

There is one aspect of rabbinic prayer that may explain the entire issue, and may also help us to see how rabbinic prayer builds on the conceptual basis of the social analogy in a new way. Numerous passages in rabbinic literature stress the importance of *tefilla be-tzibbur*, or prayer together with the community. This was not true in the Bible. As we saw, the Bible has examples of the nation praying together to God for salvation, or great individuals praying on behalf of the nation. But in rabbinic prayer, prayer by all of Israel for all of Israel becomes the primary form of prayer, not just one kind out of many.

Prayers spoken to God by the entire people employ Greenberg's social analogy in a special way. Rather than modelling speech to God on an *individual* petitioning *his* master or king, these prayers are modeled on a *people* petitioning *their* master and king. This model existed in biblical prayer as well. But Hazal made it the primary model for the daily obligation to pray.

Almost all of the rabbinic blessings are phrased in the plural ("heal *us*," "save *us*," etc.) and only rare exceptions use singular language. The Talmud even records one scholar who insisted that the words of the prayer for a safe journey must be changed from singular to plural ("let *us* travel in peace," instead of "let *me* . . .") because "a person must always join himself

28. Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik made this point in *Raayonot*, p. 89. But Blidstein (p. 71) points out that the view "the patriarchs instituted the prayers" is not quoted with halakhic import in *Hilkhos Melakhim*, but as an *aggada*. So Rambam does indeed *rule* according to Rabbi Yose, not Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, though he may have thought both had historic merit.

Also: note that the names are reversed in the Talmud Yerushalmi. And see *Noda Bihuda*, 4, who suggests that only *musaf* has verses about the sacrifices because its origin is that it was "instituted corresponding to the sacrifices" and not by the patriarchs. This means there is a practical difference between the two.

with the community" (*Berakhot* 29b–30a). Not just the language of prayer was "pluralized," but its circumstances were changed as well: the halakha requires prayer to be said together with the other members of one's community. If he cannot physically join the congregation, then he should at least pray at the same time as they do. And finally, each member of the community prays for the same things as every other, for things which are needed by all.

Why did the rabbis place such a major emphasis on *tefilla be-tzibbur* (community prayer)? Numerous passages in rabbinic literature suggest that *tefilla be-tzibbur* has more power than the prayer of an individual, that God prefers these prayers for some reason and He responds to them more favorably. It is never explicitly stated why this is so. However, it is likely that it has something to do with the covenant between God and the Jewish people, whom He loves and has promised never to abandon. In other words, the prayer of an individual Jew has no special "claim" on God. God is merciful and caring and may answer such a prayer as well, of course. But God has a historical relationship with the Jews as a people; He has a special love for them and made a commitment to them in return for their keeping His Torah. To use Greenberg's terminology, communal prayer has a much stronger "motivation" than individual prayer because the nation is a partner in God's covenant. For this reason He is always ready to accept prayers by the entire people or on their behalf.

An additional factor favoring communal prayer is a moral one. Prayer on behalf of the community is less self-serving than a prayer focusing on one's own needs. In the Bible, whether or not a prayer was answered had to do with the kind of person offering it. One who doesn't respond to the pleas of other people has no right to expect God to answer his prayer. In the same way, showing that one cares about others—by praying together with them and for them—increases the worthiness of both the prayer and the pray-er, making God more ready to accept it and answer it.

If *tefilla be-tzibbur* lies at the heart of nearly all the rabbinic rules for prayer (number, content, and time), then we are in a position to clarify a number of issues at once. First, we can now understand why the *content* is fixed in rabbinic prayer. Rabbinic prayer remains based on the social analogy, but uses that analogy in a way that was not always employed in the Bible. Every time an individual fulfils his rabbinic obligation to pray, he speaks as a member of a large group petitioning their king. But when a people petitions its king, the requests are not personal; rather, each person who addresses the king asks for the needs of the group. If each emissary asks for something different ("Give us this!" and "Give us that!"), then rather than a united people asking for its needs we have a large, demanding mob! Therefore, in halakhic prayer *everyone asks for the same things*; this does *not* necessarily mean that everyone says exactly the same words. Rather, each blessing has a theme, and every Jew is required to say a specific number of blessings on predetermined topics. Each and every Jew asks God to grant the entire nation wisdom, forgiveness, health, prosperity, redemption, etc., though not necessarily in the same words. The result is that the entire nation pleads to their King as one, for needs that are shared by all.

Rambam believed that besides the general themes of the blessings, their exact words were prescribed as well. (We briefly mentioned his reason for why this was done above, and will discuss it fully in chapter nine.) However, a number of other halakhic authorities whose views we will examine later (in chapter eight) believed that while all Jews must ask God for the same general things, the exact words don't matter. The overall subjects of prayer were fixed by the rabbis, but not its text. I suggest that for those who disagreed with Rambam, the overwhelming importance of *tefilla be-tzibbur* is enough to justify the halakhic requirement that a certain number of blessings be said on particular topics. For *tefilla be-tzibbur* to exist in the first place there must be unity in what individuals ask God for. But *tefilla be-tzibbur* does not require prayer to have fixed words.

Furthermore, *tefilla be-tzibbur* does not eliminate the opportunity for personal prayer (though the former has a higher value). Personal prayer remains an informal activity which is religiously meritorious. Talking to God about personal things has a valued place both inside and outside the framework of the halakhic, obligatory prayers no less than it did in the Bible. By requiring the entire people to approach God together for communal needs the rabbis strengthened a kind of prayer that was less frequently employed in biblical times, but they expected individual prayer to continue as well.

If we regard *tefilla be-tzibbur* as the fundamental basis of rabbinic prayer, then we are also in a position to suggest why the obligation to pray was based on the times and numbers of sacrifices in the Temple. When they spoke of *tefilla be-tzibbur*, Hazal wanted to create a situation where the entire people spoke to God as one unit. As was mentioned before, the content of prayer was fixed so that everyone would all talk to God about the same things. But for them to talk to God together as one, it was also necessary for them to talk to Him at the same time! Obviously it was impossible for Jews in every country, city and village to pray at exactly the same time. But since the quorum of ten was taken to represent the entire people, it was only necessary for the Jews in each community to join such a quorum and pray together.<sup>29</sup> And symbolically, Jews everywhere prayed at the same time of day, even if not at the exact same moment. Further-

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29. That the people gathered in the synagogue are thought of as one is also reflected in the correct halakhic term for the prayer-leader, namely *sheli'ah tzibbur*, which means "the representative of the community." Thus, each community sends its "representative" to plead with the king.

Today the term *ba'al tefilla* (one who has "mastered" the technique of leading the prayers) is often used to mean the same thing. The term *hazzan* was used as far back as the Middle Ages, referring to someone who had considerable musical abilities and led the prayers on special occasions. It was used even earlier in talmudic times to mean "synagogue official." The root is so old that it even appears in Akkadian, meaning a village official or someone involved in public worship. (Rambam often used *hazzan* derogatorily, as opposed to a Torah scholar. On his opposition to *hazzanut*, see chapter twelve.) Nowadays "hazzan" is often used for anyone who leads the prayers anytime, even if he is not a professional.

more, *tefilla be-tzibbur* may be said to link not just the nation to God, but to link their prayers together with the praying-nation of Israel throughout history.

But why were the specific times chosen those of the Temple sacrifices? A clue towards the answer lies in the fact that whenever the question of the origin of the synagogue and obligatory public prayer has been considered, from talmudic times until today, it has almost always been linked to the destruction of Jerusalem. A famous *midrash* (Shir ha-Shirim Rabba 5) first made this point:

"I am asleep but my heart is wakeful" (Song of Songs 5:2)—said the congregation of Israel before the Holy One, blessed is He: "I am asleep" when it comes to the sacrifices, "but my heart is wakeful" for reading the *Shema* and for prayer.

This midrash connects the institution of prayer to the end of sacrifice when the Temple was destroyed. It does not mention which Temple, but the connection of prayer to exile and the subsequent lack of sacrifice is far more crucial than this historical detail. Rambam connected prayer to the first exile in Babylon (specifically to the spiritual malaise caused by that exile). Heinemann considered the second destruction to have given impetus to structuring the prayers, though they began long before it. One recent scholar who criticized Heinemann wrote that obligatory daily prayer was entirely nonexistent before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. The dates may vary, but whether one reads talmudic sources, medieval halakhists or modern scholars, the talmudic rules for prayer are consistently linked with the destruction of a Temple (regardless of whether it was the first or second one). There is something strongly intuitive about this linkage, despite major disagreements about the dates.

The link between the lack of a Temple and the synagogue is further emphasized in another famous midrash:

"I have indeed removed them far among the nations and have scattered them among the countries, and I have become for them a smaller sanctuary in the countries whither they have gone" (Ezekiel 11:16)—these are the synagogues and houses of study in Babylon.

Here not just prayer is linked to the loss of the Temple, but Torah study as well. The essential point is that when the national *avoda* of the Temple was lost, the midrash sought some sort of public *avoda* that still remained. As we saw in our discussion of biblical prayer, *avoda* can mean any act that expresses loyalty to God. Here, prayer and Torah study are the public *avoda* that still remain after the Temple is gone.

The idea of obligatory public prayer may be seen as a product of "exile mentality." Before the first Temple was destroyed, no need was felt for a steady kind of national *avoda* as a supplement to the Temple worship. But once Judah was exiled, the need for the people to continue their relationship to God as a nation needed expression, and the answer was public



prayer. When the Temple was rebuilt, such prayer continued, for it was meritorious and there was no need to abolish it.<sup>30</sup> The inevitability of the Temple worship was no longer assumed, either, which gave communal prayer added distinction; but communal prayer still became secondary to the Temple sacrifices once again. When the second Temple was destroyed, Hazal saw the need to emphasize national prayer and make its structure more formal, so that the people would respect it and it would endure as an institution. In short, the institution of obligatory community prayer has a connection to exile and destruction, but not an absolute one. Even when the Second Temple stood it still had a value.

Thus, it may have been that while the First Temple stood there were two simultaneous levels of worship (*avoda*), one public and one private. The communal *avoda* was the one performed by the *kohanim* in the Temple; this worship was an aspect of the covenant done on behalf of the entire people. But at the same time, every individual had his own personal relationship with God and could pray any time. Greenberg showed that individual prayer can be meant by the biblical term *avoda* as well. Thus, there were two kinds of *avoda* on two different levels simultaneously.

When Jerusalem was destroyed the regular communal worship of God in the Temple ceased, and the only kind of relationship with God that remained was that enjoyed by individuals praying. It was for the nation to preserve its *collective* relationship with God on a regular basis that the halakhic form of *tefilla be-tzibbur* was created. To have each community pray to God at the same time, for the same things, restored the Jewish people's link to God as a single people. And since this kind of *tefilla be-tzibbur* was meant to be collective worship by the entire nation in place of the lost Temple sacrifices, the times and numbers for *tefilla be-tzibbur* were made to correspond to the laws of the Temple sacrifices exactly.

In conclusion, the kind of prayer reflected in the Talmud is based on Greenberg's social analogy no less than biblical prayer. But the halakha prescribed certain times and locations for prayer as well as unified themes in its content, to the effect of employing that social analogy in terms of an entire people speaking to their king. This unified prayer-worship was patterned after the other great form of communal worship in Israel, namely the Temple sacrifices, when the latter was no longer taken for granted.

Despite the appeal of this suggestion, we must candidly admit that using the concept of *tefilla be-tzibbur* to explain why certain other aspects of prayer were fixed by the halakha is nothing more than an educated guess. If it is correct, then we have successfully delineated the conceptual basis of talmudic prayer. But even if other valid reasons can be offered for the

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30. As opposed to Fleischer (see chapter ten), who argues that the very existence of the Temple absolutely precluded regular public prayer. My argument is less extreme: The absence of (or distance from) the Temple creates a deeper need for such prayer, and the first destruction may even have been its first impetus, but when the Temple is brought back it need not crush this form of *avoda* entirely. I disagree with Fleischer's assertion that public prayer would be viewed as dangerous competition with the Temple service.

halakhot of prayer, it is still clear that rabbinic prayer fully accepted the social analogy.

Another possible explanation for the rules of rabbinic prayer is that it was meant to add an "educational" component to the activity. This component was also present to a degree in biblical prayer<sup>31</sup> but it seems obvious Hazal insisted on many basic religious hopes and aspirations being included in prayer for the edification of the people who said them. This fits nicely with Rambam's idea that the introduction of fixed prayer was connected with the malaise afflicting the returnees from Zion, as described in Ezra and Nehemiah. However, unlike for some philosophic reinterpretations of prayer that we will study later, it must be stated that even petitions that served a pedagogical purpose were still "real" for Hazal. For example, the halakha ordains a special blessing for the restoration of the Davidic monarchy, and this may have served to reinforce the people's belief that it would, indeed, return. But the prayer was still a "real" prayer offered in the hope that God would answer it. For Hazal, reinforcing the people's belief in redemption was secondary to actually *bringing* that redemption closer through prayer. Hazal did not regard any prayer as a mere didactic device.

We are now in a position to address some of the questions we posed in the last chapter from the perspective of rabbinic prayer. The question about why community prayer is more worthy or effective than private prayer requires no more explanation. Why the halakha requires prayer at certain times and according to a specific structure has also been fully answered. We may also say that since talmudic prayer remains based on the social analogy, *bakkasha* (petition) remains its central aspect as in biblical prayer, but petition for needs of the nation take priority over individual requests. As for the rabbinic definition of *kavvana*, in chapter two we saw that it too was essentially the same as in the Bible. As far as what the term "service of the heart" means, we said Hazal preserved the spirit of the biblical word *avoda*, because prayer expresses allegiance to God. Thus, we have already answered all the questions we called "Questions on the Nature of Jewish Prayer."

From the perspective of rabbinic prayer, it is also possible to give straightforward answers for our questions on *kabbalat ha-tefila* (the acceptance of prayer). In biblical prayer it is the moral worth of the person and the sincerity of his prayer that merit God's positive response. The same is true of rabbinic prayer, though here it would be better to speak of the moral worth of the *nation* and the sincerity of *their* prayers.

Hazal did add one point here, though. *Kavvana*—to really mean what one says—is crucial, but it must be accompanied by a humble attitude. Hazal frowned upon the kind of lengthy contemplation intended to "force" God to answer a prayer by continuing to pray until He does, or for a person to pray with great *kavvana* thinking that his *kavvana* makes him *deserving* of an answer. These attitudes are what Hazal meant when they criticized

31. See Greenberg, "Tefilla," cols. 920–921.

"lengthy prayer" and "contemplating prayer."<sup>32</sup> The humble sincerity called for in rabbinic prayer is like that of a subject towards his king, or a child to his father. This is *kavvana* for simple prayer, both biblical and rabbinic.

### "FUTILE" PRAYER: THE BEGINNINGS OF A PROBLEM

With this, we have learned most of what we needed to understand about rabbinic prayer. But before concluding, we must address a certain philosophical question about prayer that Hazal themselves brought up. This question is related to one of the questions we posed at the end of chapter three, namely: "What things are fitting to pray for?"

It may seem like a simple task to answer this question from the perspective of rabbinic prayer, because rabbinic prayer answers it exactly the same way as biblical prayer. Whatever needs people asked God for when they prayed in the Bible are the same things they asked for in rabbinic times (though with a stronger emphasis on national needs for the rabbis, and more examples of individual prayer in the Bible). However, when we say that "What things are fitting to pray for?" is a *philosophical* question, it does not mean *what* to ask God for in general. What the question means in a philosophic context is something more fundamental: Can a person ask God for *anything* at all, no matter what it is? Does there ever come a point when it is ludicrous to ask God for some particular favor? Is any prayer ever absurd?

When the rabbis of the Talmud ask these questions, they are really concerned with how prayer relates to determinism, to the idea of cause and effect in the laws of nature. When and how can (or should) prayer serve to overcome the laws of nature? After all, those very laws were made by God.

It does not matter whether the "laws of nature" function according to the rules of Aristotle or Newton. For us today, the question would be whether there is a place for prayer in a universe governed by Einstein's equations. Hazal also knew that the universe functioned in an orderly way (that it has "laws"), through the science of their own time, drawing heavily on Hellenistic ideas. So the question—Does prayer violate the laws of nature?—is not really an ancient one or a modern one; it confronts any person who prays, regardless of the science of his day. Shalom Rosenberg<sup>33</sup> called this question the "cosmological paradox" of prayer, and asserted that it is one of the major things making prayer conceptually difficult for modern man. But almost all the sources he quoted dealing with the problem are pre-modern! In reality the problem is not modern, nor ancient, but eternal. The following mishna (*Berakhot* 9:5, 54a) first raised the problem in the Jewish tradition; it will be followed by other passages in the gemara dealing with its implications:

32. For a fuller discussion of *ivyun tefilla* and *ha-ma'arikh bitfillato* see chapter one, note 5.

33. Rosenberg, pp. 109–113.

A person says a blessing over evil things similar to what he says over good things, and over good things similar to what he says over evil things. If a person cries out to God about something that has already happened, it is a futile prayer. If his wife was pregnant and he said, "May it be God's will that my wife give birth to a male child"—this is a futile prayer. If he was returning from a journey and he heard cries of terror in the city and said, "May it be God's will that it not be in my house"—this is a futile prayer.

Blessing God for both evil things and good things is connected to the issue of "futile prayer" in this way: For things that are in the future, one may pray. But for things that have already happened, praising God is man's proper response, as Gerald Blidstein pointed out in an excellent paper explaining this mishna and its ramifications in detail.<sup>34</sup> Petition is "futile" when it comes to the past, so it must give way to acceptance and praise.

So we can only pray, says the mishna, for things that have not yet happened. The embryo carried by a pregnant wife is already male or female, even if the parents cannot know which. (Perhaps a different example would have been chosen in our age of ultrasound technology!) If one heard a terrified scream then someone must already be in trouble, regardless of who it is, and prayer can do nothing to change the situation. One's subjective ignorance about a situation does not justify his praying about it.

But the gemara is not satisfied with this. It asks: Is it true that we *never* pray for miracles? And then it provides an example of when a prayer did cause a miracle, specifically when it came to changing the sex of an unborn baby!

"If his wife was pregnant and he said, 'May it be God's will that my wife give birth to a male child'—this is a futile prayer."

But doesn't praying for God's mercy have value? Rav Yosef brought a proof-text opposed to this [Mishna]: "And after this she bore him a daughter, and she named her Dinah" (Genesis 30:21). What does "and afterward" mean? *And afterward* Leah came to a conclusion for herself, saying: "Twelve tribes are destined to be descended from Jacob. I have given birth to six, and the maidservants to four. This makes ten. If this child is a male, then my sister Rachel will not even be like one of the maidservants!" Immediately it turned into a daughter, as it says, "and she named her Dinah."—We cannot refer to a miracle to prove the mishna wrong.

To clarify matters, Rav Yosef's question on the mishna is that the female embryo Leah carried did indeed change into a male, so such a prayer is not always futile! The answer given in support of the mishna is that miracles

34. "The Limits of Prayer: A Rabbinic Discussion," in *Understanding Jewish Prayer*, ed. Jakob J. Petuchowski (New York: Ktav, 1972), p. 113.

happen, but the mishna was not talking about miracles. Prayers to change the laws of nature are usually futile. The *normal* idea of prayer is to pray for the future, for things which have not yet been determined.

But *may* one even bother to pray for a miracle? It seems that Leah did and that she was right to do so.<sup>35</sup> But the mishna explicitly calls such a prayer "futile," and it is not clear that Rav Yosef rejects the gemara's defense of the mishna. Only in the Talmud Yerushalmi (*Berakhot* 9:5) is there an explicit opinion to permit it:

The school of Rabbi Yannai say: "This mishna refers to a woman already on the travailing stool. Until then he may pray." Rabbi Judah ben Pazzi said, "Even when she is on the travailing stool the sex of the child may change, as it is written, 'I went down to the potter's house, and behold he was doing work at the wheels [*avnayyim*, the same word as for "travailing stool"]'. . . . And the word of God came to me saying, O House of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter . . . ? Behold, as the clay in the potter's hand so are ye in my hand, O House of Israel'" (Jeremiah 18:3-6).<sup>36</sup>

Rabbi Yannai's school explicitly permits praying for a miracle right up *until* the last minute (but not *during* the last minute), an opinion which can be technically reconciled with the mishna, though it is forced. Rabbi Judah ben Pazzi, on the other hand, rejects the mishna's limitations on prayer entirely. God is a miraculous figure, as we see throughout the Bible. So why *not* pray for miracles?

Note, however, that even Rabbi Judah ben Pazzi does not suggest praying *after* the baby is born. Blidstein suggests that once a fact enters our personal experience (when it becomes our "personal history") we should no longer pray for a miracle. This is not because God can no longer do a miracle, but because He has shown us that it is His will for us to accept the reality He has given us. I suggest refining Blidstein's idea by saying instead that once a fact has entered *human* experience God wills that we accept it (even if the person praying does not personally know the outcome yet). In this way, Rabbi Judah ben Pazzi would only disagree with the mishna's prohibition on praying to change the sex of the embryo. One may pray, because the unborn child does not yet have an identity in human society. To mankind, its nature is still unknown. But Rabbi Judah ben Pazzi would thus *agree* with the mishna not to pray, when one hears a terrified scream, that it not be from one's own house. If someone is in terror, then that terror is

35. Ibid., p. 114. Rosenberg (p. 126 n. 87) directed me to the commentary *Tzelah* by Rabbi Yehezkel Halevi Landau (1714–1793), known as the author of responsa *Noda Biyuda*. *Tzelah* has it that R. Yosef, who cites the story of Leah, requires prayer for miracles and thus argues with the Mishna.

36. For this quotation I followed Blidstein's translation (p. 115) with minor modifications to make it fit the Yerushalmi. But I quoted the whole section from Jeremiah as the midrash does.

already part of *human* experience, even if I do not personally know who it is yet. At this point, I must accept God's terrible decree with a blessing.

In any case, we have seen the first rabbinic answer to how prayer interacts with natural law. It interacts with natural law by overcoming it. When we pray, we ask God to do a miracle for us. But this opinion, held by Rabbi Judah ben Pazzi and by the midrash about Leah, is rejected by the mishna when it rejects "futile" prayer for a miracle.

But what if we follow the mishna and we don't ask for miracles? What kind of prayer does that leave us with? If we accept the mishna, and agree that we should only pray when the future is still indeterminate, then another question arises: When exactly is the future indeterminate? Precisely when *can* we pray? Is there really any point at all in which the laws of nature, through cause and effect, have not already determined what will happen? According to the continuation of the first passage, in a second attempt to reconcile the midrash about Leah's prayer with the mishna, the answer is a limited "yes":

A different answer is that Leah prayed within forty days of conception. As we learned in a *baraita*: "For the first three days a man should ask for mercy that [the embryo] not decay. From three days until forty days he should ask for mercy that it be male. From forty days through three months he should ask for mercy that it not be a miscarriage. From three months through six months he should ask for mercy that it not be a premature, non-viable birth. From six months until nine months he should ask for mercy that the child be born sound.

But can praying for God's mercy [that it be male] really help? Did not Rabbi Yitzhak the son of Rabbi Ami say: If the man gives off his seed first she will give birth to a male, but [if] the woman gives off her seed first she will give birth to a male? As it says: "When a woman gives off seed—she will bear a male" (Leviticus 12:2).<sup>37</sup>—The case here is where both gave off seed at the very same time.

According to the gemara's conclusion, "science" tells us that in very limited circumstances, when a man and woman both give off seed at the exact same time, the sex of the baby remains indeterminate for forty days. It does not matter whether the gemara's science is the same as ours, because the answer is equally as valid for Einstein as it was for Hazal: If the laws of nature allow for any indeterminism whatsoever, then this opinion asserts that prayer is only effective in those circumstances.<sup>38</sup> But man will not be able to pray for whatever is governed by cause and effect.

In his discussion of this issue, Blidstein concluded with the two possibilities we have mentioned so far: Either we ask God to *break* His natural

37. This is, of course, a midrashic reading of the verse and not its plain meaning.

38. It is well known that Einstein himself was loath to allow for such an area, to let aspects of nature be left up to chance even on a microcosmic level. But the modern physics based on his work does have an aspect of indeterminism.

laws when we pray, i.e., we pray for miracles, or we pray only for things that are not as yet certain. He further connects these two possibilities to two Talmudic visions of how God judges the world. According to Rabbi Yose (*Rosh Hashana* 16a), God judges man anew at every instant. Even if he was found unworthy during the annual Universal Judgement on Rosh Hashana, God will still manipulate things in his favor if he improves later in the year. God's justice is "dynamic" for Rabbi Yose (as Blidstein puts it<sup>39</sup>). But other talmudic passages indicate that once God has made a decree, this may prevent a prayer from being accepted.<sup>40</sup> These two opposite approaches complement the two views on "futile" prayer, because they are really attempting to solve the very same problem. If the universe is governed by natural laws or Divine decrees (especially the decree given on Rosh Hashana), this would seem to make prayer impossible; because of this, "supplication becomes a vicious joke" as Blidstein put it at the very beginning of his article.<sup>41</sup> If a person is doomed to suffer a tragedy, either because God's judgement doomed him on Rosh Hashana, or because the laws of nature force that outcome, prayer cannot help according to this view. This side takes natural law and Divine decree at face value, concluding that prayer is only viable in the limited area of the indeterminate (like the mishna's example of a child conceived simultaneously by both parents), or when there is as yet no Divine decree.<sup>42</sup> The other side contends that neither natural law nor Divine decree is inviolate: God can do a miracle, or He can judge man anew each day. Blidstein concludes with the following remark about these two opposite approaches: "For some, the world is held together by a Divine structure, for others, it is held together by God Himself."<sup>43</sup>

In this view we are left praying in a very few limited instances, or praying for anything at all as miracles. But Shalom Rosenberg offered yet a third approach; there is still another talmudic passage on "futile" prayer (*Bava Metzia* 42a):

Rabbi Yitzhak said: Blessing is only present in something that is hidden [*samui*] from the eye, as it says, "The Lord will ordain blessings for you upon your barns [*ba-asamekha*, like *samui*]" (Deuteronomy 28:8).

The school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: Blessing is only present in something that the eye cannot encompass, as it says, "The Lord will ordain blessings for you upon your barns."

The rabbis taught in a *baraita*: A person going to measure his grain says, "May it be Your Will before You, Lord our God, that You send

39. Ibid., p. 116.

40. Blidstein, pp. 118–119, cites *Niddah* 70a–b (Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hanania), and *Rosh Hashana* 17b–18a (Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Elazar). There is a parallel argument about repentance on 17b.

41. Ibid., p. 112.

42. Ibid., pp. 118–119.

43. Ibid., p. 120.

blessing to the work of our hands." When he actually starts to measure he says, "Blessed be He who blesses this heap [of grain]." If he measured and said the blessing afterward it is a futile prayer, because blessing is not present in something that has been weighed, nor in something that has been measured, nor something that has been counted, but in things that are hidden from the eye. As it says, "The Lord will ordain blessings for you upon your barns" (Deuteronomy 28:8).

According to this passage, anytime a person does not see what is true for himself, he can ask God to change it. Rosenberg calls this last case a situation of "epistemological indeterminism," but what it means more precisely is that the amount of grain is *knowable* (it can easily be measured), though it is as yet *unknown*. As long as the amount of grain is still unknown to him, a farmer can still ask God to bless it and increase it. But the passage we read earlier about the sex of an embryo reflects a situation Rosenberg calls "ontological indeterminism"; what he means by this is that the sex of the child during the first forty days was considered objectively undetermined by Hazal's ancient science.<sup>44</sup> Obviously, the last passage we read (asking God to bless the grain as long as it has still not been counted) leaves a lot more room to pray for a great many things.

If a person may pray about anything that remains as yet unknown to himself, then we have an answer to "What should a person pray for?" which is far more stable (in a historical sense) than that which looks for areas of indeterminism in "scientific" terms. This is because as our scientific views change, there will be ever fewer areas left to pray about.

A simple example will make this clear. Let us say there is a drought, and a person prays for rain though there is not a cloud in the sky. If we say that a person can only pray for things that are indeterminate, then in rabbinic times he could not ask God to make it rain at that very instant, because that would require a miracle. He may pray for clouds to move in and provide rain the next day, or the next hour, or maybe even the very next minute, but he may not pray for rain to fall at the instant when the sky is clear blue. This is because according to this opinion we do not ask God to change the laws of nature. We do not pray for miracles.

Nowadays, however, our understanding of meteorology leaves less room for praying for rain. It may be "knowable," i.e., provable, that it will *not* rain

44. I agree with Rosenberg that both parents emitting seed at the same time, according to talmudic biology, reflects "ontological indeterminism." But I think he picked the wrong case when it comes to "epistemological indeterminism." A better case would have been the mishna according to its plain sense: Since the sex was *unknowable* before birth in ancient times one may still pray, even though laws of nature say the sex is already determined at birth. The sex is *objectively* determined but *subjectively unknowable*. In my opinion, this case is closer to what the term "epistemological indeterminism" should mean than the example of the grain, which Rosenberg applies the term to. In the grain case, the amount is *subjectively knowable*, but presently *unknown*.



in the next hour, or even the next day. If a contemporary person hears a weather report predicting clear skies for two days, perhaps he should only pray for rain on the third. (Everyone knows, of course, that meteorology is an inexact science, but the *principle* here is clear.)

But if we accept the alternative approach that indeterminism is *subjective*—that I may pray for anything I am unaware about—then ancient men and modern men may pray for exactly the same things. Even if the weatherman can objectively prove that it will not rain for twenty-four hours, if I am unaware of his prediction (or if I am sceptical about his expertise!) then I may ask God to bring rain before the day is over.

What Rosenberg failed to note (when he discussed the passage on asking God to bless the amount of grain) is that praying in cases of “subjective indeterminism” really amounts to exactly the same thing as praying for miracles! As Blidstein pointed out,<sup>45</sup> even the opinion that one may pray for miracles does not allow a person to pray for the sex of the baby to change *after* it is born! Rabbi Judah ben Pazzi specifically permitted such a prayer even when a pregnant woman is on her birthstool (i.e., long after the sex is an objective fact), but *not* after the baby is held in its parents’ arms. At this point, after the parents themselves have been confronted with reality, it is God’s will that they accept the reality He presented them with. They should no longer pray, not because God cannot do miracles, but because He has shown that He does not desire to perform one in this case.

So in a practical sense, praying for miracles until one is personally confronted by reality, when he faces a “done deed,” is really no different than praying only as long as a situation is subjectively indeterminate. Both amount to praying until the object of the prayer becomes history. Both mean that one may pray for things that are in one’s personal future (or in humanity’s future), but not about things that are part of one’s past (or the human past).

Thus, we are left with two competing ideas: the idea that prayer implies miracles, and the idea that prayer is effective only when circumstances are not already determined (though there are two very different views about what “indeterminate” means). (Rosenberg also suggests a third angle, not based on any talmudic text, that man’s experience of prayer somehow exists in harmony with the natural universe. In chapter six we will see that some of Rav Kuk’s ideas on prayer lead in this direction.) But despite these two options—praying for miracles or only praying for things that are not absurd—most approaches to prayer in modern Jewish thought chose to simply ignore the question. As we will see in chapter six, the philosophical paradoxes raised by prayer deterred modern thinkers from addressing whether asking God for something can really help change a person’s circumstances in his physical reality. The idea of a universe that follows orderly and logical mathematical laws also served to push modern thinkers away from the idea that prayer changes physical circumstances. Instead, they focus almost exclusively on how prayer is essential to man’s spiritual

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45. Blidstein, p. 115.

life, but say next to nothing about whether it actually accomplishes what it literally purports to do. This essential fact is the major gap dividing both ancient and medieval views on prayer on the one hand from modern thought about prayer on the other: While the former assert that sincere prayer can, somehow, be effective by changing one's circumstances the way he asks God to, the latter either avoids the issue or explicitly denies it is possible.

So the rabbinic debate about what a person should pray for versus what is a "futile" prayer has lead us back to the philosophical paradoxes we raised in the last chapter. But we can now add a whole new dimension to the major paradox, which was:

- If God decides that a person's wish *ought* to be granted, why is it necessary to pray for it? —
- If God decides that a person's wish *ought not* to be granted, how can we presume to change His will by praying?

Now when we speak of God's Will and His decisions about what a person ought or ought not to receive, we mean not only His judgement about an individual person, but also the overall natural laws He created the universe according to. If God decided, as Newtonian physics presumed, that the universe functions according to basic calculus, then can our prayers influence Him to override the rules He already decided to put into effect? For Hazal the answer was clearly "Yes," because they believed in miracles (including rare miraculous responses to prayers). But Hazal also asked: Granted that prayer *can* change the laws of nature, then *should* we pray with that in mind and ask for miracles? Here there is a difference of opinion: Rabbi Yehuda ben Pazzi said yes, but according to the mishna which rejects "futile" prayer one should *not* pray for miracles. This opinion, when taken to an extreme, could come close to the idea of rejecting simple prayer altogether.

In fact, Rosenberg is of the opinion that Hazal themselves moved in that direction. He bases his assertion on a famous passage: "Rabbi Yitzhak said, 'Why were our patriarchs barren? Because the Holy One, Blessed is He, desires the prayers of the righteous'" (Yevamot 64a; cf. *Tanhuma Toledot* 9). The idea is that each of the patriarchs had a barren wife so that they would be forced to pray for her to have a child. According to Rosenberg, this passage bears the implication that petitionary prayer's true purpose is not petition, but for a person to intensify his relationship with God. Many medieval and modern thinkers moved in this direction, thereby radically reinterpreting the nature of prayer.<sup>46</sup>

However, this is not the plain meaning of the passage in question. The question the Rabbi Yitzhak asked is not "What is the purpose of prayer?" but "Why were our patriarchs barren?" The question was not so much about prayer as about how God treats his faithful servants. The answer is

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46. See Rosenberg, p. 111, and the next chapter of this book.

that, far from trying to alienate them by punishing them with barren wives, God tried to use barrenness as a tool to deepen their relationship with Him, because He loves them. But the passage only speaks of the patriarchs who were especially beloved by God, and of their particular burden, but not of the sufferings of average Jews. According to its plain meaning, it does not tell the rest of us why *we* pray.<sup>47</sup> Nor is it really concerned with the purpose of prayer at all.

Furthermore, this passage can tell us nothing about what Rosenberg calls the “cosmological paradox,” or how prayer can function when faced by the laws of nature. The reason is that, bottom line, God *did* answer the patriarchs’ prayers for children. The previously barren wives did give birth. The “simple” sense of prayer remains in effect in Rabbi Yitzhak’s famous statement, which has little or nothing to do with the philosophical paradoxes of prayer.

Nevertheless, the talmudic discussion of “futile” prayer can still be seen as a step by Hazal toward the philosophic paradoxes of prayer. And as we saw earlier, the philosophic paradoxes have devastating consequences for the “simple” idea of prayer. To speak to God as if He were a person, and to hope that He will answer us literally as a person might, becomes ludicrous if one considers the paradoxes. As we said, this paradox may lead some to reject “simple” prayer (in both its biblical and rabbinic versions) for its “naivete.”

So for rabbinic prayer—just as for biblical prayer—the most intractable conceptual barrier to praying remains the philosophical paradoxes. In the passages on “futile” prayer that we cited, rabbinic prayer went one step further than biblical prayer towards acknowledging those paradoxes, but still did not address their full implications. It is still possible to label both biblical and rabbinic prayer as philosophically “naive,” and to reject the social analogy for a supposedly “deeper” understanding of prayer, based on an entirely different conceptual basis. Many have done so. But before we explore those alternatives to simple prayer in the next two chapters, it will be worthwhile to see if there can be any justification of prayer based on the social analogy that is *not* intellectually naive. Is there a way simple prayer can face the philosophical paradoxes raised by prayer head on, and still retain its integrity? I believe that such an approach exists.

### RATIONAL CRITICISM OF THE “SOCIAL ANALOGY” (WITH A RESPONSE)

In the last chapter we posed many serious questions about the nature, purpose, and intellectual viability of prayer. We answered most of these questions already from the perspectives of biblical and rabbinic prayer, both of them “simple” models of prayer based on the social analogy, but we left

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47. In later sources it does mean the prayer of all Jews. See *Shemot Rabba* 21:5, which is quoted in reading 8 at the end of this book.

the philosophical paradoxes unanswered. As we saw, these paradoxes seem to crush the idea of simple prayer. The social analogy "breaks down spectacularly" (as Rabbi Shalom Carmy has put it) when we contrast petitioning a human being to petitioning God.<sup>48</sup>

Some thinkers fully understood the devastating implications of the paradoxes for simple petitionary prayer, and since they could not accept those implications they rejected simple prayer entirely. But is there is a more satisfying (and tolerant) approach to the problem?

To say that biblical and rabbinic prayer are philosophically unreflective and pigeonhole these models as "naïve" prayer seems almost too easy, too simplistic. Furthermore, there is reason to doubt that such a label is really appropriate. In my opinion, calling prayer based on the social analogy "naïve" risks oversimplifying how men thought in ancient times. It is worth considering whether a positive justification of the biblical and rabbinic models of prayer exists.

But before suggesting an answer, let us first reconsider the intellectual paradoxes which cause such serious problems for the simple concept of petition in the Bible and the Talmud. Earlier we read Maharal's formulation of them because of its convenience: he asked all of the major questions at once. But he was not the first major thinker to pose such questions about Jewish prayer. Serious debate about Jewish prayer from a philosophical perspective actually began with Rabbi Yosef Albo in his *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* (Book of Principles). Albo lived in fifteenth-century Spain (before that country expelled its Jewish population), and his book is considered by many to be the last major addition to the classical works of medieval Jewish philosophy. It draws on the works of his predecessors and often sums up their views. *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* also contains the fullest and most comprehensive discussion of prayer to be found in the entire literature of medieval Jewish philosophy.

Albo raised questions about the seeming illogic of prayer as a branch of his general discussion about divine providence. He asked: In an overall scheme where God metes out justice to human beings according to their deeds, where and how does prayer fit into His design? Does prayer really mean that man can somehow influence God's decisions? And if it does not, then how can its literal purpose be achieved? For philosophers in the Middle Ages, the problem was further compounded because of presumptions that God, in His perfect unchanging Oneness, alters neither His decisions nor even His knowledge due to changes in the particular circumstances of our mundane world. Or, as Albo paraphrased the questions of people in his day who questioned the rationality of prayer:

What causes men to doubt the efficacy of prayer is similar to what leads them to doubt God's knowledge [of particulars]. What people say is that the matter cannot escape one of two possibilities: Either a

48. Shalom Carmy, "Destiny, Freedom, and the Logic of Petition," *Tradition* 24, no. 2 (1989): 19.

certain good has been decreed for a man by God or it has not. If it has been decreed, then there is no need for prayer! And if it has not been decreed, then how can prayer possibly change God's will to have Him decree good for a person when He hasn't? For God does not change from approval to disapproval, nor from disapproval to approval. It is because of this that people think proper behavior will not cause a certain good to reach a person from God, and similarly that prayer cannot help a person attain some particular good or be saved from evil that has been decreed for him.<sup>49</sup>

Albo added a new perspective to the paradox as we formulated it earlier by tying the problem in with a rationalistic assumption that a "perfect" God changes neither His knowledge nor His decisions. But the basic thrust of the problem remains the same. Note, however, that of the three questions posed later by Maharal, which we quoted earlier in chapter three, Albo only raises two. He doesn't mention the question "God knows our thoughts and realizes what we need or want even if we do not pray. So why pray?" For this question we must turn to Rabbenu Bahya Ibn Pakuda, who raised it for the first time centuries before both Maharal and Albo. Rabbenu Bahya didn't raise the paradox as a question per se, but as an implicit assumption about the true purpose of prayer:

Your knowledge includes everything that is good for me, and I haven't told You my needs to make You aware of them, but so that I will realize my utter dependence on You and my reliance on You.<sup>50</sup>

This, in a nutshell, is the philosophic or rational approach to the activity of prayer. Bahya assumes from the very beginning that God has no use for our prayers, that He already knows everything about us, that we don't have to ask Him for what we need, and that the entire purpose of talking to God is really so that "I will realize my utter dependence on You and my reliance on You." In other words, prayer is really meant to influence man, not God. This basic approach was later fleshed out and refined by Rabbi Yosef Albo and other thinkers, as we shall see, but the one who first brought it into Jewish philosophy was Rabbenu Bahya.

For our purposes now, the crucial thing to realize is that this rationalistic idea of prayer as a kind of "self-training" (an idea that we will explore in greater depth in the next chapter), ultimately leads to the rejection of "simple" prayer where the *mitpallel* expects God to personally respond to his pleas. It is not clear that Bahya himself entirely rejected "simple" prayer, but it is definitely true for Albo and later thinkers whose views we will discuss. For all these men, the philosophical paradoxes were so blatant and devastating that they justified a complete redefinition of prayer. These

49. *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, chap. 18 (my translation).

50. *Hovot ha-Levavot*, *Sha'ar Heshbon ha-Nefesh*, chap. 3 (no. 18). The full passage is quoted at the end of this book in reading 2, section C (source 20).

rationalists were totally certain that prayer cannot really be an attempt to "win God over" so that He will grant our requests. But were those who prayed in biblical and rabbinic times really so unaware of these problems? And if not, why didn't they also re-explain the purpose of prayer?

One of the guiding principles of intellectual history is that different historical contexts and different worldviews engender the asking of different kinds of questions. This point becomes clear when we notice how many of the heated debates in medieval philosophy seem strangely irrelevant to us today. This is because both sides in those debates worked within systems of thought which were self-consistent on their own terms, but whose basic assumptions have lost their cogency today. Their arguments made sense given their views on the nature of the man and his universe, and must be understood as such, without forcing our present-day ways of thinking on them. Similarly, one cannot assume that questions such as our paradoxes of prayer, though they have been important concerns for religious people in both medieval and modern times, should have bothered ancient figures who simplistically viewed relationships among both men and God in the very same way. They had no reason to question this relationship and we must not force questions deriving from our own worldview upon them. This is what lead us to call biblical prayer "naive" in the first place.

However, some human issues are so basic that they overcome the limitations of time and place, and have been continuously raised in human societies since the beginning of history. Such questions may be variously formulated depending on the assumptions and terminologies of those who ask them, but the core of the problem always remains the same. I cannot objectively prove that our prayer-paradoxes are indeed such issues, but I do believe that they are so.

A hint of this comes from the presentation of the most prominent Jewish writer on the paradoxes, namely Rabbi Yosef Albo. Let us consider how he formulated the central paradox of prayer five centuries ago. When we quoted him above, we saw that he was not only concerned with why prayer should affect a wise and all-knowing God, but also with a distinctive issue of medieval metaphysics: Albo's concept of God's perfect "oneness" precluded the idea of God's changing His decisions. Furthermore, Albo went so far as to address the opinion which stipulates that since God's knowledge does not change with mundane human events, He must be entirely unaware of human circumstances. Albo rejected this latter point, but he was forced to respond to it seriously because it derived from a general medieval approach to God's nature and His relationship to the universe which he himself fully shared.

At the crux of Albo's formulation of the paradox lies a point that is equally relevant to a religious person in modern times. One can read Albo's question in its original context, appreciate the medieval metaphysics surrounding its presentation, and then realize that the core problem still remains an issue for modern man, even after rejecting the medieval packaging in which it comes wrapped. A contemporary Jew will not be concerned about whether or not God's being "One" means that His very

knowledge is unchangeable, because such questions lost their appeal after Kant demonstrated the inability of human knowledge to penetrate beyond human experience. Man cannot know anything definite about God (such as His "Oneness" or His "knowledge") simply based on reason or logical categories, much less ascribe an anthropopathic nature to Him, a nature that relates to human emotion and experience. Moreover, thinking that God relates to human longings and experiences in itself questions God's wisdom. As Kant himself wrote, "It is at once an absurd and presumptuous delusion to try by the insistent importunity of prayer, whether God might not be deflected from the plan of His wisdom to provide some momentary advantage to us."<sup>51</sup> Kant's point here is not essentially different from Albo's paradox, but something more lies behind it: the utter impossibility of human conceptions saying anything at all about God's true nature or will.

Unlike Albo, modern man will not argue that God is "unchangeable" or that He cannot be "influenced," because both of these statements presume to say something about God's very nature. We no longer believe that human terminology or human frames of reference can prove anything objective about God. This is why medieval systems of metaphysics have less meaning for religious people today. However, even in modern times a person may still conclude (as Kant himself did) that petty human concerns should have nothing to do with a God who is entirely beyond our experience and understanding, that we cannot possibly presume to talk to Him in human terms. This leads one to reject the simple idea of prayer.

The fact that Albo's thoroughly "medieval" question translates into modern terms so well does not *prove* that it might just as well be shifted backwards (chronologically) into the worldview of an ancient people. But it is a very strong indication of the problem's basic appeal to the human mind and its universality. In fact, Greek thinkers in ancient times stated these problems explicitly!<sup>52</sup> Of course, Greek culture had no direct connection to pre-exilic Israel and could not have influenced how biblical prayer was understood. But the fact that the problem was realized so early in a pagan culture shows that it is not simply a result of concerns related to systems of monotheistic metaphysics like those of the Middle Ages.

A stronger indication is found in biblical passages hinting that human conceptions of God are inadequate for a true understanding of Him, or that He is indeed beyond human comprehension. The best-known example is from the Book of Psalms; the following passage assumes that there is a relationship between God and man, but also admits that such a relationship with an infinite God must remain beyond human understanding (8:4-10):

When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and stars that You set in place; what is man that You have been mindful of him? Mortal man that You have taken note of him?

51. Cited in Heiler, p. 89.

52. See the references scattered throughout "Critique and Ideal of Prayer in Philosophical Thought," in Heiler, pp. 87-103.

You have made him little less than divine, and adorned him with glory and majesty! You have made him master over Your handiwork, laying the world at his feet, sheep and oxen, all of them, and wild beasts, too; the birds of the heavens, the fish of the sea, whatever travels the paths of the seas.

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name throughout the earth!

That God desires and maintains a relationship with man is true beyond doubt to the psalmist. But *why* God takes note of man is beyond understanding. That infinite God relates to finite man must remain a mystery to man because of his very nature, and it cannot help but raise logical paradoxes. The psalmist's response is to assert *both* sides of the paradox with equal conviction: God *does* maintain a relationship with us *despite* His being completely and utterly beyond us.

How can we reconcile these verses from the psalms with the "social analogy" for prayer that is such a clear and basic part of biblical religion, as Moshe Greenberg has shown? The "social analogy" implies that we *do* share a frame of reference with God without ever questioning it.

I suggest that biblical man may not have been entirely "naïve" regarding our paradoxes. Undoubtedly, many biblical characters who prayed were indeed "naïve" in the sense that they simply talked to God in the same way as to another human, never considering that it might not be logical to talk to God this way. Many people do this today as well. However, I cannot accept the idea that such problems never crossed the minds of biblical characters when they prayed, that not one ever wondered why the protestations of a mortal man (or woman) should affect the decisions of an all-knowing and all-powerful God. Such questions are implicit in the paradox posed by the psalmist in the passage we quoted above, though it does not deal with prayer specifically. Some readers may counter that I myself am so thoroughly conditioned by my intellectual climate that I have unfairly projected my way of thinking unto an ancient people with vast differences; that once I read Albo's question the problem became too "obvious" for me when it is really not so. There is no definite proof either way, but it intuitively seems that the utter simplicity and relevance of these questions makes it impossible for any religious culture to avoid them entirely.

If I am correct that some people in biblical and rabbinic times pondered these paradoxes (even if they didn't call them "paradoxes" or deal with "philosophy"), how could they continue praying according to Greenberg's description of the social analogy? And even if this was not the case, is there any way that Jews today can be intellectually justified in praying according to that simple model of prayer? There is a subtle approach to this dilemma which not only puts the problem to rest in practice but is, in my opinion, far more convincing than the various philosophic and mystical re-definitions of prayer we will encounter in later chapters.

Let me introduce this answer by stating that a fundamental belief of any devout Israelite or Jew, from biblical or rabbinic times to this day, is that God made a personal covenant with Israel. This covenant has provisions for



both sides, as does any similar human agreement. Indeed, all of our paradoxes regarding the "social analogy" for prayer could be posed regarding the covenant between God and His people as well, because when one challenges the social analogy for prayer by raising its intellectual inconsistencies, something much larger than the activity of prayer is at stake. What the paradoxes truly deny is the very possibility of any relationship at all between God and man that can be understood in human terms. Yet Judaism *does* assume there is an understandable relationship between God and His people Israel, a relationship that was given binding force in the reality of the revelation at Mount Sinai! As the psalmist put it, God is "mindful" of man (though man does not understand *why*)! That He gave us the Torah shows that He is "mindful" of us. And this, indeed, is the crux of the matter: The very idea that any kind of relationship is possible between man and God, between the finite and the infinite, is by its very nature incomprehensible to man who is finite. Therefore, any religion resting on the assumption that such a relationship exists will be forever plagued by intellectual quandaries such as our paradoxes of prayer. Indeed, differing attempts to explain how a perfect and all-powerful God relates to the imperfect and limited universe in which man exists make up the fundamental cores of the most important medieval schools of philosophy and mysticism. (And not one of them ever arrived at a fully satisfactory resolution of the problem.) Instead of adopting one of these approaches and trying to re-explain prayer according to a system of metaphysics or mysticism, I suggest that a very simple (and yet entirely mature) response to the problem may have been at the heart of how people thought of prayer in both biblical and rabbinic times.

Such people must have realized that they could never fully understand their relationship to God in logical (i.e., human) terms, and yet they knew that God desired a "human" relationship with them because the Bible says so time and again. How can these two opposite points be reconciled? In logic they can never be, but if a religious person takes the social analogy seriously in practice, then he cannot avoid the following practical conclusion about prayer: "God desires a personal relationship with me. But since I am only a limited human being, He allows that relationship to be conducted in terms that I can understand, i.e., in the terms of interhuman relationships. He expects me to speak to Him as I would to any human authority who is also wise, kind, and just, as He revealed about Himself in His Torah. I mean what I say to Him as I would mean it to another person. When I talk to Him in this way, it does not mean that I truly understand His essence, but it allows me to relate to Him, to think of Him in terms of my life, my experiences, and my personal relationship to Him. This approach does not resolve my intellectual quandaries about prayer, because the very nature of the problem makes it clear that these questions cannot ever be fully answered. But this approach to God provides me with a framework for talking to Him, a framework that lets me pray with sincerity and really mean what I say."

The above view of prayer lays the philosophical paradoxes to rest, not by answering them but by denying their basic validity. On a personal level, I have no doubt that many Jews from biblical times until today have thought

about the matter in this way, though of course there is no way for me to objectively prove it. There is no way to prove the opposite either, and what one decides will be based on his subjective intuition. In any case, whether my intuition about "simple" prayer in ancient times is right or wrong, one thing is definitely true: the approach I outlined above can intellectually justify that kind of prayer for Jews today who are drawn to it. Since Kant, we have been aware of the impossibility of knowing anything about the nature of God from logic. But unlike Kant, we can take this realization in the opposite direction with faith: Religious people should be wary of adopting a rationalistic reinterpretation of prayer that rests upon the supposed "impossibility" of God being moved or affected by our prayers. Who are we to say that prayer cannot affect God if rationally we can understand nothing of Him? And if we believe that the Torah is truly God's word, then what gives us the right to substitute our "rational" idea of prayer for the real petitionary prayer that was assumed in the Bible and by Hazal?

It is true, as Kant said, that we cannot really understand God, much less describe His true nature. But the Torah makes the opposite claim: not that *we* reveal God's nature but that *He* revealed Himself to us. Through His prophets, He spoke to us in human words. For our purposes, revelation means that we can think of God using our own concepts and in our own terms. Not that we truly know Him, but that He relates to us—and we to Him—in a human way. Religious Jews believe that God plays a role in our world, despite the fact that such a role cannot be proven rationally or defined in logical terms. If we believe in revelation and in the hand of God in history, why can't we also believe that God responds to prayer personally?

This approach also puts to rest the "cosmological paradox," i.e., the dilemma of how prayer fits in with cause and effect in the laws of nature. Any version of physics that man comes up with will always represent the universe as understood from a human perspective. As we move from the physics of Aristotle through the physics of Newton to the physics of Einstein and even beyond, we are still dealing with *human* categories, complex as they may be. Physics is the universe as understood by man, or what man can understand of it. But we can never know God. All we can know is how He wants us to relate to Him, which is in the categories of human relationships. Since prayer is part of that relationship, we will never be able to reconcile it with how He structured our universe, and that is how things must be.

Readers of a certain bent will be tempted to point out the inherent indeterminism that modern physics has found on the microcosmic level, or the increasing subjectivity in higher mathematics, and try to tie these things in with making prayer possible. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, but it is not the approach I am suggesting here. Instead, I propose applying science to the fullest *as science*, and not trying to fit it in with an area like prayer or metaphysics that operates under different categories. Science is what man can know about the world, while prayer is how he relates to an unknowable God in a human way. The best way to understand them both is not to mix them.

Intellectual maturity is not just a matter of education but also an issue of modesty, of knowing and accepting the limitations to what one can discover or know. If I am correct that some biblical and rabbinic figures probably accepted “human” notions of God in practice *despite* being aware that they could never understand His true nature, then theirs was a truly mature approach to the man–God relationship. It remains a valid model for us today.

However, I fully understand that some readers will not be happy with the justification of “simple” prayer I have described here. Whether it is satisfactory or not is mostly a subjective decision, and there must be alternatives for those who do not like it. Those who are uncomfortable “sidestepping” the intellectual paradoxes as I prefer, but instead need a model of prayer which deals with them head-on, should carefully consider the various rationalistic and mystical views of prayer that we will discuss in the next two chapters.

## Going Beyond Simple Prayer: Rationalism and Mysticism

### BAHYA AND ALBO: PRAYER AS RELIGIOUS SELF-TRAINING

Rabbenu Bahya Ibn Pakuda compared prayer without *kavvana* to a body without a soul. We read that comparison (and the parable by which he illustrated it) in chapter one. Later, in our brief summary of the rationalistic critique of "simple" prayer (at the very end of the last chapter), we saw Rabbenu Bahya's important new idea that petitionary prayer is really for the pray-er, not for God. Now we will survey his ideas as a whole.

Bahya wrote no formal treatise on prayer, but the subject was clearly precious to him because he refers to it so often throughout *Hovot ha-Levavot* ("Duties of the Heart"), and because he supplemented the book with an extraordinarily beautiful *Bakkasha* ("Petition"), a prayer that he composed himself in Hebrew (the rest of the book was originally written in Judeo-Arabic, his native tongue, and only later translated into Hebrew). By collecting everything Bahya wrote about prayer and reading it together, a unified and compelling concept of prayer shines through. For now, we will suffice with a summary of his views, paying special attention to how he answers the questions we posed in chapter three ("How Does Prayer Make Sense?"). Since the full texts of his comments on prayer can be found in reading 2 (at the back of this volume), we will quote only the most crucial passages here.

Bahya opened *Hovot ha-Levavot* with a distinction between inward and outward duties toward God. The "inner" ones, which are the primary topic of his book, include such things as belief in God's unity and His Torah, absolute acceptance of His authority (both emotionally and intellectually), loving and fearing Him, submitting to Him, complete trust in Him, appreciation of His gifts, and many others. The "outer" obligations are physical activities that God commanded in His Torah, such as building a *sukkah*, wearing *tzitzit* (fringes), etc. But Bahya even considered "mind-centered" mitzvot such as prayer and Torah study to be part of the latter group of "outward" duties because they require a physical activity (namely

speech), and also because actually performing them depends on having the *physical* opportunity to do so. In this sense, prayer and Torah study are not like a duty such as believing in God's unity, which no power on earth can prevent.<sup>1</sup>

The fact that two kinds of duties exist derives from the fact that a human being was created with both a body and a soul, i.e., with both an "inner" and an "outer" life, and it is fitting that we serve God fully with both of our aspects by doing *mitzvot* that are "hidden" and *mitzvot* that are "revealed." But Bahya unequivocally states that even the visible physical activities that God commanded us also require "inner" obedience: they must be performed out of a conscious decision to fulfil God's will out of pure motives. This is why later in *Hovot ha-Levavot*, Bahya usually refers to "physical" *mitzvot* (including prayer) as "obligations of the heart and the limbs together."<sup>2</sup>

At one point Bahya fully explains how "joint" obligations of the body and the heart (such as prayer) are fulfilled both inwardly and outwardly. There are three requirements to performing an "obligation of the heart and the limbs" in its fullest sense: (1) fully accepting God's overall authority, (2) sincerely intending to perform this particular act because God has commanded it, and (3) making every possible effort to actually carry out the act physically. Thus, even for the "outward" *mitzvot*, two of their three aspects are entirely "inward."<sup>3</sup>

According to Bahya, each individual is always entirely responsible for fulfilling the first two "inner" aspects of an "outward" *mitzva*. Since nothing can ever prevent a person from accepting God's overall authority, or from making the inner commitment to perform a *mitzva*, God holds every person responsible for doing so. Only the third aspect of actually carrying out the *mitzva* is dependent upon circumstances and opportunities. If the physical opportunity is denied, God still rewards a person for his sincere intentions. But Bahya adds that a person must pray to God for the ability to fulfil the *mitzva*, and ask God to enable him to do so with complete devotion and no outside distractions and worries. By asking God to help him physically perform a *mitzva* with complete devotion, a person proves his sincere intention to do it, and this means that he will still be rewarded for those intentions even if he is prevented from carrying out the actual act. This is one of the most important petitionary prayers: to ask God to help us serve Him. In particular, one must pray to God for the ability and opportunity to pray with devotion. In other words, a person prays for the ability to pray!<sup>4</sup>

This leads us into an important part of Bahya's writings on prayer, namely his notion of what it is right to ask God for. Just now we saw that

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1. See below, reading 2 ("Rabbenu Bahya Ibn Pakuda on Prayer"), source 1. All references to this section on Rabbenu Bahya will be to the source numbers listed at the end of that reading.

2. Sources 5-7, 18-19.

3. Source 6.

4. Source 7.

it is fitting to ask God to help us fulfil His mitzvot (including prayer itself), and for guidance in doing so. Bahya also mentions other "spiritual" goods to ask God for: to become closer to Him and for Him to forgive one's sins. Bahya notes that our prescribed prayers ask for every person's basic human needs, but he never mentions asking for specific material gifts from God. Instead, he points out that requests for particular things are often inappropriate because God knows what we need better than we do ourselves. The only particular kind of good that Bahya says to pray for anywhere in *Hovot ha-Levavot* is not a private need at all, but for God to guarantee social stability and the welfare of those in positions of public responsibility. This is based on an explicit Mishna: "Pray for the welfare of the government, because without fear of it men would swallow each other alive" (*Avot* 3:2).<sup>5</sup>

The astonishingly beautiful "Petition" Bahya wrote as an appendix to his book is actually mostly *praise* of God in terms of its content, not *petition*. In the middle there is a short request for forgiveness of sin, for the mercy of God's pardon, and a "motivation" (similar to what we saw in biblical prayer) pleading for God to be kind because of one's sincere prayer, his humility, and his just way of living. Only at the very end of the "Petition" do we actually find a number of petitions: "Guide me on a straight path, purify my thoughts and ideas from the unimportant patterns of this world . . . Save me from all pain and trouble . . . which prevent me from serving You. Give me my daily bread and spare me from hard toil and from shame. Prevent me from suffering lack of food or clothing and open my heart to run in the path of Your mitzvot. Grant me knowledge and understanding . . . to add to my appreciation of You and to understand Your pleasant paths and Your beloved ways."

Thus, in his "Petition," Bahya is entirely consistent with the kind of prayer he described in *Hovot ha-Levavot*. He asks for forgiveness, for basic human needs (but only as generalities), and for God's help and guidance in serving Him. Since prayer for Bahya, as we saw earlier, is primarily meant to remind *man* of his position in relationship to God (not to influence God), most of the "Petition" is a kind of praise describing God, and man in relation to God, in a manner that is striking for its simplicity, honesty, and sincerity. In my opinion, Bahya's "Petition" is the most beautiful extant example of what a rationalistic Jewish prayer can and should be like.

The idea that praise is a more important aspect of prayer than petition brings us back to some of the larger questions about prayer that we raised in chapter three. Earlier, when we discussed the rationalistic assault on "simple" prayer, we quoted Bahya thus about prayer: "I haven't told You my needs to make You aware of them, but so that I will realize my utter dependence on You and my reliance on You." Here is the full passage:

They said that one of the *tzaddikim* used to say this after his prayer: "My God, it is not my lack of knowledge of my small worth that has brought me to stand before You, nor that I lack awareness of Your

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5. All of the sources cited in section C (2, 8, 16, 17, 20, 22).

greatness and exaltedness. For You are high and exalted while I am only poor and unimportant, too small and petty to ask You for anything or call to You or praise and sanctify Your name, which is sanctified by the high and holy angels. Rather, what has brought me to do this is that You commanded me to pray to You, and You permitted me to praise Your exalted Name as far as my understanding of You allows, while emphasizing my utter servitude and submission to You.

"Your knowledge includes everything that is good for me, and I haven't told You my needs to make You aware of them, but so that I will realize my utter dependence on You and my reliance on You. Therefore, if in my ignorance I ask something from You which is not fitting for me or I ask for something that will not benefit me, Your exalted decision is better for me than my own choice and I hereby give over my situation to Your decree and Your exalted guidance."<sup>6</sup>

The primary purpose of prayer is for man and not for God: "so that I will realize . . ." So it is not surprising that prayer for Bahya revolves around praise, and not petition: even the *petitions* in a prayer become a kind of praise by making one's "dependence" and "reliance" on God stand out. Furthermore, it is no longer surprising that Bahya refrains from requesting specific things from God, because God's "knowledge includes everything that is good" for any person. Since a person, in his limited understanding, is likely to request things that are not truly good for him, it is better to leave the decision up to God. The only specific things he should ask for are those of spiritual worth, which are always good.

However, Bahya does not seem to fully dispense with "true" petition. We saw above that Bahya does petition God for the basic and general needs that all human beings share, as well as for help in serving God. There is no reason to assume that these petitions are not meant literally. Furthermore, in the passage at hand Bahya hints that an ignorant request for something "which is not fitting for me" or "something that will not benefit me" is still heard by God. That is why he submits the ultimate decision about what is truly good for a person to God. It seems to me that Bahya saw "self-training" as a deeper meaning of prayer, in fact as its primary meaning, but that he did not actually reject the idea of a "true" petition to which God is expected to respond.

Bahya's "Petition," which is his own personal creation, clearly shows that a rationalistic view of prayer need not idealize the fixed halakhic times for prayer, nor its fixed wording. (Other rationalists, as we shall see, found more "essential" value in the rabbinic texts of blessings and in their specific rules than Bahya did.) Bahya admitted that mitzvot such as prayer, whose purpose is to show acceptance of God's authority, do require a predetermined structure. Since there is no objectively "right" way of how or when to do these mitzvot, or to hold people responsible for not doing them, the

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6. Source 20.

Torah had to create guidelines for them to give people direction and prevent laxity. But these rules have no essential value in and of themselves, even though they remain fully binding. In the case of prayer, words had to be composed,

. . . so that through them a person can turn to his Creator and his tongue will not fall short while he prays . . . And since the thoughts of a person's mind are so confused, without stability because of the quick way ideas fly through him, it will be difficult to say the ideas of prayer by oneself. Therefore our predecessors [Hazar] structured the ideas of prayer in correct language, so that a person will say them with his tongue. This was done because one's thoughts follow his speech and are joined to his expression; thus the prayer becomes words that express an idea.<sup>7</sup>

But despite the good reasons for a prescribed prayer-text, Bahya emphasizes that the words themselves have no essential value of their own: "The words require the idea, but the idea does not need the words if it can be expressed in the heart . . ." He notes that Hazal would not have allowed a person who is in a hurry to say a short prayer if saying the exact words was the main thing.

By no means is the mitzva of prayer limited to the prescribed prayers in the words of Hazal. After all, it is "the idea" expressed in a prayer, and not its words, that is important. Therefore, if a person has the desire and opportunity to pray in his own words beyond the requirements of Hazal, it is important for him to do so. When the Torah created guidelines for mitzvot like prayer that are meant to demonstrate God's authority, it was only to provide a minimum requirement and prevent laxity, as we said above. But every Jew is encouraged to do more than the bare minimum, to say his own voluntary prayers in addition to the prescribed prayers.<sup>8</sup> Bahya himself provided a model for doing this in the "Petition" that he composed.

Just as Bahya found no essential value in the texts or times of rabbinic prayer, but only a practical necessity, he also does not strongly relate to another important aspect of rabbinic prayer, namely prayer together with the community. The only place he even mentions community prayer is during a description of how the evil inclination sometimes tries to "trick" us out of doing mitzvot: he tells us that it is immodest to reveal our piety by praying with *kavvana* when the community can see us. The answer to the Evil Inclination is that since public prayer is a mitzva, we do it because it is God's will and not so that people will respect us.<sup>9</sup> This is a reason not to avoid the obligation of public prayer. But Bahya makes no *positive* statement about *tefila be-tzibbur* anywhere in his book.

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7. Source 19.

8. Source 9.

9. Source 13.



Besides degrading prayer by making it a vehicle to show off in public (In this regard, Bahya also mentions *hazzanim* who like to show off their talent!<sup>10</sup>), the Evil Inclination tries to ruin prayer by reminding a person of his many burdens and duties, telling him to use the free time that he has for prayer to take care of business or mundane chores. Prayer is also ruined if a person does not mean it sincerely, either because he simply cannot take his mind off worldly matters, or worse because he deliberately intends to rebel against God. Bahya quotes a pious man who says of insincere prayer that “such a prayer requires asking for forgiveness.”

Bahya disqualified insincere prayer by using the social analogy in a way that is reminiscent of many things that the Bible and Hazal said about prayer with *kavvana*. It is particularly close to Greenberg’s description of *kavvana* based on the social model of “winning over” someone through sincerity, which we quoted in our discussion of biblical prayer. This is how Bahya put it:

Take council with your soul and tell it: “How can I deal with the exalted Creator in a way that is not fitting to act towards other people when I need them or they need me? Because for someone that I turn to for some need, and ask him with my tongue to fulfil it, but my mind and my consciousness turn away from him—if he knew this he would turn me away detesting me, and he certainly wouldn’t fulfil my request. All the more so if he knew that my mind was busy with something that actively opposed his will, or even with something that would infuriate him at me, which would make his abhorrence for me even worse and make him even more justified for not fulfilling my request.

I myself would certainly behave in a similar way towards someone who asked me for something, when I knew that his real intention was like God knows about my secret intention now. How can I not be ashamed before my Creator, wanting for him something from myself that I would not want for myself from someone weak like me . . . ?”<sup>11</sup>

By now, our description of prayer in the thought of Rabbenu Bahya has already addressed most of the questions on prayer we posed at the beginning of this chapter. The philosophical paradoxes become mostly irrelevant with Bahya’s idea that the primary purpose of prayer is “self-training,” i.e., it serves to remind *us* how much we need God, not to tell *Him* what he should do for us. However, we did note that Bahya probably did not reject the simple meaning of “petition” altogether, and so the paradoxes have not yet been fully dispensed with.

As far as our questions on God’s “acceptance of prayer,” what makes a prayer worthy according to Bahya is obviously sincere *kavvana*. Some prayers are not accepted, perhaps because they lack *kavvana* or the person

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10. Source 10.

11. Source 12.

who says them is not worthy, but also because God knows better than we do what is truly good for us. (In other words, the fact that a prayer is not answered may really be a blessing in disguise.) A person should only pray for the basic and general human needs that everyone shares, and well as for spiritual things like closeness to God, the ability and wisdom to follow in His ways, and forgiveness for sin. But it is a mistake to ask God for specific material gifts. And finally, even if a person knows that he is not worthy of having his prayer answered he must still pray for two reasons: because it is a halakhic obligation to do so, but also on a deeper level because the main purpose of prayer is not to receive gifts (whether he deserves them or not) but to make himself realize his utter dependence on God. According to this, it might be said that an unworthy person has even more reason to pray that a worthy one!

In terms of our general questions on the nature of prayer, it is clear from what we said above that even though fixed times and texts for prayer are a practical necessity according to Bahya, they are not really central aspects of prayer. They are formal obligations, but after one has finished them it is equally as much of a mitzva to add voluntary informal prayers on his own.

Bahya does not specifically mention why prayer is called *avoda* (service), but it seems to fit in well with his description of prayer as a mitzva whose purpose is to express our absolute acceptance of God's authority and our total dependence on Him. We are His servants, and perhaps prayer becomes an aspect of "serving" by acknowledging this and accepting His authority.

Bahya also answers our overall question "What is *kavvana*?" The essence of prayer is the "idea" in one's heart, and not the words. Thus, *kavvana* is to emotionally *feel* the meaning of the words one says. *Kavvana* is when the "idea" in one's heart and mind agrees with the words he says, when "his tongue and his heart are the same." *Kavvana* is absolute sincerity in accepting God's authority, in loving God, in realizing one's insignificance in relationship to God and his utter dependence on Him, etc. These are the "ideas" expressed in prayer, and *kavvana* is to really mean them and not just say them.

Of all the questions we asked about prayer, there is only one that Bahya never address at all. Nowhere does Bahya explain why the halakha places such a great emphasis on *community* prayer. As we saw, he only mentions that it is an obligation to make the point that one may not abandon public prayer and pray privately out of a mistaken concern for humility and modesty. But he never explains its essential value. Perhaps this is because public prayer is not a necessary part of the kind of prayer and *kavvana* that he describes in *Hovot ha-Levavot*. If prayer is essentially an exercise in self-training and reinforcing correct ideas about man's dependence on God, and *kavvana* is sincerity about the "idea" expressed in a prayer, then what role does *public* prayer play? All the points Bahya made about prayer with *kavvana*, especially extra voluntary prayer, are essentially *private* matters. It may simply be that for Bahya, Hazal decreed public prayer for entirely separate reasons having nothing to do at all with prayer's "true" essential meaning. If so, then public prayer remains a formal obligation, but has no relationship to Bahya's philosophy of prayer.

This concludes our discussion of prayer according to Rabbenu Bahya. But before proceeding to Rabbi Yosef Albo's ideas we must re-emphasize an ambiguity that Bahya never completely answered, because Albo's greatest contribution was to solve precisely that issue. As we saw, Bahya wrote that prayer is primarily "so that I will realize my utter dependence on You and my reliance on You." In other words, prayer is for man and not for God. Its deep meaning is that it is a form of religious self-training. But Bahya made no clear statement on whether the idea of "true" petition, that God actually responds to personal requests, still remains. I tend to think that Bahya did accept "true" petition in addition to his idea of prayer as self-training because of the many times he expresses the hope that God will answer prayer. When he expressed the rationalistic idea that prayer is primarily to help "train" a person religiously, it was in the context of solving a paradox: "God knows what we need or want even if we do not pray. So why pray?" His answer is a fine rational explanation of why prayer must be verbalized. But it still leaves open the option that God responds to prayer, even if the main reason for praying is not for Him to hear it.

Note, however, that Bahya never raised the more severe double-sided question that utterly destroys the idea that God answers prayer, namely: "If God decides that a person's wish *ought* to be granted, why is it necessary to pray for it? And if God decides that a person's wish *ought not* to be granted, how can we presume to change His will by praying?" It was Rabbi Yosef Albo's great contribution to the idea of prayer in Jewish philosophy to explicitly raise this problem and offer a comprehensive solution for it. We will turn to his thought now and see how he built on the rationalistic view of prayer as "self-training," whose earliest representative was Rabbenu Bahya.

Albo devoted nine full chapters to his philosophic analysis of prayer. Unlike Bahya, who launched into digressions on prayer in the middle of other topics, Albo's treatment of prayer is organized and comprehensive. He began with a number of important preliminary points about prayer to clear up many of what he considered to have been the misconceptions about prayer held by people in his time. To begin, he says that when people don't pray, it is either because they don't believe that God is aware of the actions of man (*hashgaha*) or that He has complete ability to intervene in their affairs. Both of these ideas are heretical. But there are even some believers who do not pray, because they do not consider themselves worthy of having their prayers answered. Albo responds that they should still pray; of course Bahya would have said the very same thing, because prayer is primarily meant for the pray-er anyway, and not to influence God. But Albo adds that an unworthy person should still pray not only as "self-training," but even with the hope that the prayer will actually be granted. Not considering oneself to be a righteous person is a properly humble attitude, says Albo, but this should not affect prayer. For everything God grants human beings should be viewed as gifts of His kindness, and not simply as payment for one's good deeds. God's *shefa* (literally: "overflow" or "abundance," used in medieval works of Jewish thought to mean spiritual virtue or even material abundance whose ultimate origin is from Above) con-

stantly issues forth from Him because of His eternal kindness and His desire to give to others, and it will always be received by anyone who is ready to accept it. Even if a person is entirely unworthy in terms of his good deeds and only prays to God during his time of suffering, such "readiness" to receive God's *shefa* can still be acquired through prayer. Even the prayer of wicked King Menasseh, during his captivity, to be freed and restored to his throne was answered (2 Chronicles 33:12–13). This is because God's *shefa* is given off by Him through a conscious will, and it is His will that they be received by one who has prepared himself through prayer.<sup>12</sup>

But why and how does prayer achieve this wonderful result? Albo began to address this question by defining the essential differences between God and natural forces.<sup>13</sup> First, all natural forces lack a conscious will. Fire does not "intend" to burn, nor water to cool, nor medicine to heal. They have been endowed with various powers by their Creator, but they have no freedom of choice about when to make their various effects felt, nor even the intelligence to make such a choice. Furthermore, each natural force has exactly one specific effect, and can never achieve its opposite: Fire cannot cool, and water cannot heat unless it does so because of a chance situation, such as when the water has already been heated by fire.

The bottom line is that it makes no sense to pray to any natural force. The mistake made by idolaters was to think that such forces had a conscious will and that they were therefore subject to the influence of prayer, but they were wrong.

Then what type of being *does* it make sense to pray to? According to Albo, it is only fitting to pray to one for which the following four things are true:

- (1) Its will must be unchangeable;
- (2) It must not be dependent on any other force outside of itself;
- (3) It must be equally able to accomplish opposite natural effects such as war and peace, health and sickness, destruction and building;
- (4) It must not be susceptible to interference by any other force.

If any of these four qualities are absent in a being, then it is not worth praying to it. If its will is changeable then its gifts may not be permanent. If it depends on another force or if it is susceptible to interference by another then one can never fully rely on its help. And if it cannot accomplish opposite effects then its powers are limited too severely to be of lasting value.

Obviously, no power but God can fulfil all of these criteria, and therefore

12. *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, Part IV, chap. 18. According to Symcha Bunem Urbach, Albo was influenced by the kabbala in when he said that prayer "prepares" a person "to receive the *shefa*." See *Amudei ha-Mahashava ha-Yisraelit*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, Torah Education Department, 1955). But Rambam also spoke of *shefa* reaching a person only when he is intellectually prepared to receive it (in the *Moreh*, 3:18). The idea of preparation for *shefa* is no less philosophic than kabbalistic.

13. *Ibid.*, chap. 17.

it is only fitting to pray to Him. With this point, Albo answers two major questions at once. The first problem is *why* prayers make a person ready to receive God's *shefa*. The answer is that through the very activity of praying to God, a person makes it clear that he has arrived at an intellectual realization that only God can grant his plea (because of the above four reasons). This realization is the true value of prayer (in a way reminiscent of Bahya), and it is precisely why prayer makes a person worthy of receiving his request even if he would not otherwise deserve it. For this point, Albo drew on the ideas of his teacher Rabbi Hasdai Crescas who wrote, "Even if a person is unworthy and unfitting to receive his request without prayer, when he prays—besides the reward for the mitzva [of prayer] itself—it makes it likely that he will attain it, since he has truthfully put all of his trust in God."<sup>14</sup>

The second problem solved by Albo's premise has to do with the nature of *kavvana*: Is prayer mainly an emotional experience or an intellectual exercise? Albo makes it clear that it is really both, but one role takes clear precedence over the other:

Prayer is aroused through one's intellectual powers and not through his emotional desires. But only after a person's desires are aroused do his intellectual powers begin searching for a way to acquire what he desires. And when he reaches the decision that the thing can only be gotten through God, who is all-powerful and grants kindness even to those who are not worthy, then he will conclude that it is fitting to pray to Him.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, it is the intellectual awareness reflected in prayer that is truly important and not any emotional state of need. But while the intellect is primary in *importance*, the emotions take precedence in the *sequence* of events leading to prayer; intellectual awareness is only arrived at as a *result* of real physical and emotional desires that a person has. Emotion is necessary as a catalyst for prayer, but prayer has the desired effect only if the emotional desire is raised to the level of an intellectual realization about one's dependence on God. It is for this realization that God grants the *shefa* to those who pray. For Albo, then, *kavvana* begins with the emotions and ends with the intellect.

This also means that verbal prayer has no "essential" value to Albo (just as for Bahya). It is the intellectual realization of utter dependence on God that is truly important, not saying the words. Albo writes that if this realization has already been reached then the *shefa* can be received even *before* a person has actually prayed!

This point also answers the question of why prayer is called *avoda* even though it involves no action that can be thought of as "serving" God. The answer is that the full intellectual acknowledgement of complete depen-

14. *Or Hashem* 3:1:1 (Jerusalem: Ramot, 1990). See below, reading 5.

15. *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, chap. 17.

dence on God, of subservience to Him, may be called *avoda*.<sup>16</sup> This sounds very similar to what we suggested regarding Rabbenu Bahya, but there is a crucial difference: For Bahya, it was the emotional commitment to God that we suggested might be thought of as *avoda*, while for Albo it is a logical realization by the mind, not the heart, that is of crucial importance.

Albo's philosophy of prayer as described here also has ramifications for what a person should pray for. If prayer is an intellectual realization, then that realization cannot be confined just to the question of *to whom* it is fitting to pray (namely God, for the four reasons we read above). A person's intellect must also decide *what* it is fitting for him to pray for. Albo's example is of a person who asks God to crown him king of the entire world, like Alexander the Great. Now, from God's perspective this is entirely possible. But a person's intelligence should tell him that *he* may not be the person most worthy of such power. Rather, he should ask God for things which his intellect concludes are truly appropriate for himself.<sup>17</sup> This point ultimately leads to the conclusion that a person should ask God for things of general good and not for particular gifts.<sup>18</sup> This is exactly the same point made earlier by Bahya, and Albo even says it in almost the same words. But Albo provides a more complicated theological explanation than Bahya did for why specific requests are wrong: Since prayer is an intellectual realization, if the request made is not logically appropriate for the person who makes it (and only God knows this for sure) then the prayer falls short *intellectually* and will have no effect. It is the *intellectual* realization that prepares a person to receive the *shefa* he asks for according to Albo, but it will not work if it is wrong.<sup>19</sup>

After everything that has been said so far about the purpose for prayer and the reason for its effectiveness, Albo was ready to tackle the philosophical paradoxes head-on. As I mentioned, he was the first Jewish writer to explicitly pose them as questions denying the validity of prayer, and his solution has remained the primary rational response to them until this day. Let us read his classic formulation of the problem again:

What causes some people to doubt the efficacy of prayer is similar to what leads them to doubt God's knowledge [of particulars]. What people say is that the matter cannot escape one of two possibilities: Either a certain good has been decreed for a man by God or it has not. If it has been decreed, then there is no need for prayer! And if it has not been decreed, then how can prayer possibly change God's will to have Him decree good for a person when He hasn't? For God does not change from approval to disapproval, nor from disapproval to approval. It is because of this that people think proper behaviour will not cause a certain good to reach a person from God, and similarly that

16. *Ibid.*, chap. 20.

17. *Ibid.*, chap. 17.

18. *Ibid.*, chap. 24.

19. *Ibid.*, chap. 17.

prayer cannot help a person attain some particular good or be saved from evil that has been decreed for him.<sup>20</sup>

We did not call attention to it before, but notice how Albo ties in the rationalistic rejection of prayer with the wider rejection of Divine reward and punishment. This is yet a further indication of how a "rational" critique of religion must question far more than prayer: the true subject of its criticism is the very possibility of any relationship whatsoever between God and man, between the finite and the infinite. The "simple" understanding of prayer in particular and religion in general, based on the social analogy, takes the existence of exactly such a relationship as its starting point. After all, the Bible describes revelation, prophecy, and God's covenant with Israel as historical facts. But a rationalist cannot accept the relationship between a perfect God and our imperfect world at face value. He is forced to either deny that relationship (and thus to deny traditional religion) or to reinterpret it according to his philosophic scheme. Albo chose the second way, and he even told us why: because even if we could not reconcile God's unchanging nature with His knowledge of the particular circumstances of men in our imperfect and changing world, "this cannot make us deny what our senses testify to, namely that God responds to people's prayers of all kinds." In other words, since the efficacy of prayer is a confirmed fact, we must do our best to reconcile it with our philosophical knowledge and not reject it.

Albo ties this point together with a similar problem that he discussed earlier in *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, namely the classic metaphysical problem of how to reconcile man's free will with God's foreknowledge. Either God knows everything about the world, in which case "the class of undetermined events" (*teva ha-efshar*)<sup>21</sup> does not exist, or He does not know everything, in which case "the class of undetermined events" may exist and free will along with it. But the choice between these two options simply cannot be made because on the one hand, Judaism stipulates that God rewards and punishes men based on their actions and so it must accept the reality of human free will. But on the other hand, God must be aware of our actions since to deny Him any knowledge is to deny His perfection, for the greatest imperfection possible is ignorance.

To solve the problem Albo wrote<sup>22</sup> that philosophic speculation should never make us deny something that we definitely know from experience. Free will and God's knowledge of particulars are two such absolute facts. (The latter is evident, Albo mentioned in passing, from the fact that the prayers of the righteous are answered.) But how can we believe in both if they cannot be logically reconciled? The answer has to do with the limits of human reason when it comes to the nature of God:

20. Ibid., chap. 18.

21. Ibid., chap. 4:2. Husik translates using the philosophic term "the category of the contingent."

22. Ibid.

If you ask: How is it possible to combine both of these ideas, accepting that the class of undetermined events exists while it is encompassed by the Divine knowledge, the answer is according to the approach of the Rambam of blessed memory. He said that since God's knowledge is integral to Him and not something added to His essence, all investigation of the nature of His knowledge becomes an investigation of His essence. And since there is no comparison between His nature and the nature of anything besides Him, so too is there no comparison between His knowledge and any knowledge other than His. Therefore, if "knowledge" as we understand it leads to denying many things, whether to deny the class of undetermined events, or to deny His knowledge of that which it cannot be imagined that knowledge could encompass it because it is undetermined, or to deny that His knowledge changes as the objects of His knowledge change—all of this derives from understanding His knowledge as similar to ours. But since his knowledge is not similar to ours, all of these denials become unnecessary. For God's knowledge is infinite, and infinite knowledge does not require us to deny these things.<sup>23</sup>

Albo sums of the point thus: "We cannot grasp the quality of His knowledge just as we cannot grasp His essence." In other words, since God's essence is entirely beyond our understanding it makes no sense to make logical deductions based on suppositions about the nature of His knowledge.

But what about prayer? Albo says we should not deny the efficacy of prayer either because of philosophical qualms about God's knowledge of particulars. God *does* have full knowledge of his Creations, and the question of how to reconcile changes in His knowledge as the objects of His knowledge change, with God's essential Oneness and His not being subject to change, is an illegitimate question—it brings us right back to the point that we cannot really say anything about God's knowledge in the first place.

However, when it comes to prayer there is a *second* problem: If God has decided not to grant something to a person, and then after the person prays He grants it, then it is not just His *knowledge* that has changed but His *Will*. How can a simple prayer change the Will of a wise and all-knowing God? Unlike the problem of God's foreknowledge, Albo does not delegitimize the premise of this question. Instead, he faces it head on.

The way Albo reconciles God's unchanging Will with His responding to prayer is the strongest rational answer that can possibly be given for the problem. The answer rests on his earlier definition of prayer as an intellectual realization that one is totally dependent on God for what he is requesting, and God accepts such a realization as preparation to receive His *shefa*. How can this preserve the idea of God's unchanging Will, thus answering the paradox? The solution is that God's granting of the *shefa* is

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23. Ibid., 4:3.



something that always continues without change. What changes is not God's decision about who should receive it, but the receivers. If someone who previously was not fitting to receive a particular good now prays, it is like he has become a new person and he will receive the *shefa* automatically. It is not God who has changed, but the pray-er. Here again, Albo's solution of this problem is based on the teachings of his mentor, Rabbi Hasdai Crescas. Crescas wrote: "When it says *ve-nehamata* [in the *Kaddish*, which Crescas interprets as "beyond any . . . regret"] it refers to petitioning for needs. Lest one think that God is moved by prayer and changes His Will, this is not the case. Rather, his prior Will was to answer any fitting prayer."<sup>24</sup> And a similar thing to what Crescas and Albo wrote about prayer is also true of good deeds: They make a person who was previously unworthy into a worthy one, so that benefits which God continually grants to the world will now reach him as well. Albo even goes so far as to compare God's *shefa* to rain: Rain does not "choose" to make crops grow, but if it falls on a field that has been ploughed and sown they will grow. And if it falls on barren ground, it will achieve nothing. Man makes himself ready to receive *shefa* through both prayer and good deeds; he himself changes through this preparation, but not God's decision. Thus, the paradox is solved.<sup>25</sup>

Albo's explanation of prayer as a type of "preparation" to receive God's *shefa* can solve another problem relating to prayer as well: the meaning of "blessings."<sup>26</sup> What really happens when one person "blesses" another, and especially when prophets or *tzaddikim* bless other people? Is such a blessing a *prediction* that the person will be blessed, or is it a *prayer* to God for him to be blessed? According to Albo, the popular opinion in his own time was that it is a combination of both: the person saying the blessing predicts that the person he is blessing will receive some sort of good, and he prays to God to increase that good even more. But after pointing out a number of inconsistencies inherent in this opinion, Albo concluded that blessings must really be intercessory prayers, i.e., prayers to God by one person on behalf of another. As such, they can easily be explained by his definition of prayer as preparation to receive God's *shefa*. Earlier in his book, Albo had pointed out that even when a person meets all the requirements needed to receive the *shefa* of prophecy, he sometimes requires some extra preparation before it can reach him. This preparation can be granted by a prophet; such was the case with Aaron and Miriam, who received such preparation through their proximity to Moses and then received prophecy.<sup>27</sup> In is no different for the *shefa* of material bounty that we ask for during prayer: Sometimes a person lacks a certain kind of preparation that is necessary to receive the *shefa* he prays for, and this preparation can be supplied by the *tzaddik*. This also explains the symbolic laying of the hands by the one

24. Or Hashem, *ibid.*

25. *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* 4:18.

26. *Ibid.*, chap. 19.

27. Albo explained this more fully in 3:11.

giving the blessing on the one who is blessed; in Albo's words: "It is as if the *hasid* or the *tzaddik* is a conduit through which the Divine *shefa* can flow . . ."<sup>28</sup>

Prayer as preparation to receive *shefa* also allowed Albo to give a convincing explanation of the importance of community prayer, something which, as we saw, Rabbenu Bahya did not address. When he discussed the most important prayer in the Bible which was *not* answered, namely Moses's plea to God that he be allowed to enter the Land of Israel, Albo wrote that God's harsh decree against Moses, which was accompanied by an oath, could not be changed by a prayer by and for an individual. Only prayer by the community has the power to change God's oath and decree. "The difference between an individual's prayer and the community's prayer even though both are of the same nature, is that the community's prayer is more accepted," wrote Albo, and he continued by quoting biblical verses and rabbinic statements to this effect.<sup>29</sup> But why? If they are of "the same nature" then shouldn't they produce the same results?

Albo's acclaim for community prayer is based on a simple point that he made previously in his discussion of blessings. He noted that the blessing of the *kohanim* is given to the entire community, not by one *kohen* to an individual:

This is the intention of the *kohanim* blessing the people: that they be conduits for the *shefa* to descend upon those being blessed according to the preparedness of every one of them. They would raise their hands during the blessing after the fashion of "laying the hands." And the blessing of the *kohanim* was for the entire Israel or the community, because the many are better prepared to receive the *shefa* than the individual; this is because it is impossible that at least one of them won't be ready to receive at least some Divine *shefa* through the *kohanim*.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, the community is considered as one unit. Many people who would not have been ready to receive *shefa* on their own will receive it anyway because at least some of those who were blessed were prepared. The readiness to receive *shefa* by some community members can "cover" for the lack to be found in others.<sup>31</sup> In this way, Albo's definition of prayer provides a strong explanation for the value Hazal placed on community prayer.

In the final chapters of his essay on prayer, Albo gives some basic guidelines about how to pray and what to say in a prayer, and when God answers prayers. He began with words that are used to praise God,

28. This is borrowed from *Or Hashem* 3:1:2.

29. *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, end of 4:21.

30. *Ibid.*, chap. 19.

31. Albo probably borrowed this idea from the *Kuzari* 3:19 (see reading 3), but adapted it nicely to his own thesis.

explaining which ones are appropriate to use when composing a new prayer (such as a *piyyut*) and which ones are not. Composing a prayer is thus something that has to be done with care: "And this makes it clear that not every person it permitted to compose words in prayer as he sees fit, all the more so to apply any description to God on his own." Albo does not object to creative prayers in principle, but to those (especially some *payyetanim*) who are not sufficiently careful about describing God.<sup>32</sup>

In his final chapter on prayer,<sup>33</sup> Albo wrote that there are three criteria for God to accept any prayer. The first has to do with the *content* of the prayer, and the other two concern the *attitude* with which the prayer is said:

- (1) "The prayer must consist of short passages which are suitable to express the intention of the *mitpallel*. One should not say too much like a fool does. . . . The words to be said must be pleasing to one who hears them and not seem like a burden to him. This is why the songs and *piyyutim* and petitions which follow a meter have been composed for prayer which meet all of these rules. They have an additional advantage in that they can be adapted to musical tunes . . .";
- (2) The intention in one's heart must match the words his mouth says;
- (3) One must lower his voice, demonstrating submission, as is appropriate to a person who pleads with his master.

In short, the words of a good prayer must adequately express one's intentions, and those intentions must be sincere. A prayer that meets these criteria has at least the possibility of being answered, but without them it is worthless.

However, even a prayer that follows the above three rules may not be enough for one's request to be granted. Sometimes this is because the *mitpallel* is so far removed from God that he must pray again and again before his prayers will take effect. And if a person is far enough removed from God, then even praying repeatedly may not be enough. He may have to add acts of submission and repentance to his prayers before they will be answered.

On the other hand, some people are on such a high level that simply praying with sincerity is enough to guarantee results. Others (those who "fear God") are on an even higher level, such that their desire is granted even before they pray, though in practice they are still obligated to do so. And finally, those on the highest level (who "love God") do not really have to pray at all, because God constantly guards them.

Albo also described<sup>34</sup> why even worthy prayers so often go unanswered, even if they are said the right way. He suggests a variety of reasons why this may occur. First of all, the prayer's being answered may conflict with

32. *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, chap. 23.

33. *Ibid.*, chap. 24.

34. *Ibid.*

God's Will; He may reject it as perhaps punishment for a sin, or for any of the overall reasons why righteous people suffer.<sup>35</sup> Secondly, it may be necessary for a person to pray many times before the prayer is granted (as Albo explained previously). And finally, sometimes a prayer may not be granted for reasons only known to God, including times when God knows that the request is not really in the best interests of the *mitpallel*. Because of this, Albo (like Bahya) concluded that one should only pray for general things and not for specific material goods, as we mentioned earlier. For Albo, the best prayer is the kind that Rabbi Eliezer said: "Master of the Universe! Do Your Will in heaven above, and grant satisfaction to those who fear You below, and do what is good in Your eyes" (*Berakhot* 29b). With this point, Albo concluded his philosophic discourse on prayer. He succeeded in giving prayer a cogent rational basis and solving many of the intellectual problems plaguing it.

But Albo's view of prayer does not explain the activity and solve the intellectual paradoxes without cost. There are two weak points to his theory, one a conceptual problem and one a practical difficulty.

Albo himself was aware of the conceptual problem, and devoted an entire chapter (4:20) to answering it. The problem is that if the whole purpose of prayer is to make a person ready to receive God's *shefa*, then how is it different than any other mitzva? Albo was forced to solve the problem by making prayer a kind of "cure-all": Each kind of medicine has its own specific properties and does a certain kind of healing, but prayer is like a generic medicine that can cure anything and everything, while other mitzvot have only limited effects. But this answer still does not show how prayer is different than *teshuvah* (repentance), which Albo often mentions alongside prayer as a mitzva showing one's submission to God which can make one worthy of receiving all kinds of *shefa* no differently than prayer.

The practical difficulty with Albo's theory is more subtle, but also more devastating in its implications. Remember that the whole purpose of Albo's definition of prayer as "preparation to receive *shefa*" was to show that when a prayer is answered it is not God who has changed but the pray-er. This has a number of important implications, beginning with the fact that according to Albo there is *no personal relationship between God and man*. In biblical prayer, "*tefilla*" meant "seeking a judgement for oneself," i.e., trying to "convince" God of the justice of one's cause in the conviction that He would then send aid. When one appealed to God's mercy it was because God was aware of his particular circumstances and would have personal pity on him. And most of all, when one spoke to God it was with the conviction that God heard him personally and responded to him in kind.

There is no room for any of this in Albo's kind of prayer. God does not respond "personally" to any prayer; on the contrary, the response to prayer is always an entirely automatic implication of the change in one's "readiness" to receive *shefa* after he has prayed. To say otherwise would be to

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35. Albo devoted an entire chapter to the topic of why the righteous suffer earlier in *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* (4:13).

imply that God's Will changes, or that he can be "persuaded" by human speech, and Albo categorically rejects both of those possibilities as compromising God's perfection.

The reason I called this a "practical" difficulty for prayer is that the actual words we say when we pray match the social analogy, not Albo's rational model of prayer. The words express the clear conviction that God responds personally to the prayer and the pray-er out of His personal kindness, love, or mercy. When we ask God to "Heal us!" the implication is that He hears us and responds to what we have asked Him. The idea is *not* that by becoming aware of our dependency on Him for health we become worthy of being healthy. In other words, the rational explanation of prayer leads to dissonance between the actual words we say when we pray and what we really mean by them. While the rational definition of prayer has changed its very nature radically, the words have remained the same. Therefore, such dissonance cannot be avoided.

Later, when we discuss the rational approach to prayer in modern times, we will see how wide the dissonance becomes between what a prayer actually says and what a "rational" prayer means, when the rational definition of prayer as "self-training" is taken to its ultimate conclusion. For now, it will be sufficient to point out that the philosophical paradoxes really do not force us to substitute a new model of prayer for the social analogy, even according to Albo himself. This is because, as we saw earlier, Albo really found *two* logical problems in prayer, not just one:

- (1) God's knowledge of the changing circumstances in the lives of men cannot be reconciled with His unchanging knowledge;
- (2) God's responding to prayer cannot be reconciled with His unchanging Will.

Albo addressed the first question by simply declaring it illegitimate: "We cannot grasp the quality of His knowledge just as we cannot grasp His essence."<sup>36</sup> Therefore, to come to any practical conclusions based on assumptions about God's knowledge is not rational. Instead, we should simply accept the Torah's premise that God is aware of men's actions at face value.

But Albo did not deny the legitimacy of the second question. Instead, he proceeded to reinterpret the entire activity of prayer because of it. No longer do we talk to God as we would to a human authority, trying to "win him over" through our sincerity. Instead, we are training ourselves by making ourselves aware that only God can grant us our petition, and it is this realization in and of itself that prepares us to receive God's *shefa*.

However, consider what Albo has done here: based on an assumption of God's unchanging Will, he proceeded to declare the "simple" notion of prayer illegitimate and substituted a rational model in its place. For the first question, he rejected the idea that we should compromise a premise found

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36. Ibid., 4:3.

in the Torah because of considerations having to do with God's knowledge. But here he did the exact opposite: because of assumptions about God's unchanging Will, he rejected the basic understanding of prayer found in the Bible and the Talmud! But if God is entirely beyond our understanding, then what makes the second question any more legitimate than the first?

It seems to me that this is the very best defense of "simple" prayer against the attacks of rational philosophy. It is entirely true that prayer makes no logical sense, but neither does the very possibility of man's having any sort of relationship with God. If we accept the Torah's premise that such a relationship does exist in terms of *hashgaha* and freedom of will, despite the fact that these ideas cannot be explained rationally, then we should do the same for prayer. Prayer should be accepted on its own terms instead of reinterpreted according to rational categories. In other words, simple prayer should reject Albo's second question exactly the same way Albo himself rejected the first one.<sup>37</sup>

In conclusion, both Bahya and Albo found that to define prayer as "self-training," i.e., to say that it is supposed to reinforce basic religious ideas in the person who says it, can help answer a number of questions and provide a cogent model for prayer. However, they do not solve the philosophical paradoxes without paying a serious price: They are forced to change the basic nature of prayer radically by doing so. This may create a major gap between what one actually says when he prays and what he is supposed to mean according to the rationalistic understanding of prayer.

### HALEVI VERSUS RAMBAM: DOES PRAYER FULFIL A RELIGIOUS IDEAL?

Rabbi Yehuda Halevi and Rambam both lived in the twelfth century, and they were influenced by the same cultural and intellectual climate. The issues facing Judaism that prompted them to write the *Kuzari* and *Moreh ha-Nevukhim*, respectively, were largely the same. But although so many of the problems they dealt with coincided, every student of Jewish philosophy is aware that there were deep differences in how they approached those problems. Though each of them wrote a book to address the major questions facing Jewish belief and practice, and their two books have remained the two most important literary contributions to Jewish thought until this very day, on almost every common issue that they tackled—and in one way or another they each confronted all of the basic beliefs and practices of Judaism—they arrived at strikingly distinct conclusions. On

37. Urbach (ibid.) suggests that Albo himself may have tried to leave room for "simple" prayer with this exact point, but concludes that his language is not clear enough to tell from. However, I find no indication of this whatsoever, and it contradicts everything else Albo wrote about God's unchanging Will and how prayer works despite it. The "opening" that this argument allows for "simple" prayer is *implicit* in what Albo wrote in 4:2–3, but Albo *explicitly* rejected it and chose to take another path to explain prayer.

some of the most important issues, to say that they arrived at exactly *opposite* conclusions would be more accurate.

Both men were rationalists in the sense that they respected intellectual accomplishment and did not believe that the Torah ever truly opposed reason. But they very different kinds of rationalists. In his *Moreh ha-Nevukhim* (Guide to the Perplexed), Rambam asserted that intellectual reasoning was the *only* way to arrive at a deeper understanding of the Torah. He wrote that pure intellectual contemplation was man's ultimate fulfillment as the "image of God,"<sup>38</sup> since he believed that God is wholly intellectual and non-physical. Halevi, on the other hand, though he believed that the conclusions of philosophic inquiry had some value even when it came to understanding the Torah, he still did not consider reason to be the ultimate source of knowledge, nor even the main path leading to a "deeper" understanding of the Torah. Instead, throughout the *Kuzari* he emphasizes that life-experience and history are better guides to right living than abstract contemplation, and that to God, exemplary action has much greater significance than good intentions or correct ideas. It might be said that philosophy has an "essential" value according to Rambam, since he considers it to be the ultimate value underlying the Torah and the primary means to human fulfillment; while for Halevi, philosophy has no "essential" value because it is just one means among many for attaining the truth, and not even the most important one for appreciating God's Torah.

I have a strong impression that a certain basic difference in attitude between the two men is the common source of many disagreements they had on specific topics; my own study of their writings has continually reinforced this impression. I am not even sure whether the "difference in attitude," which I will describe momentarily, should be thought of as an open conceptual argument or just a contrast between two very distinct personalities. But in either case, I have become more and more convinced that an overall "difference in attitude" exists, one that has important ramifications for our understanding of Judaism in general and prayer in particular.

Let me explain what I mean by a "difference in attitude" between Halevi and Rambam through a group of examples not directly related to prayer. The idea of *kedusha* (holiness) is fundamental to Judaism: in the Bible we find holy people (Israel, the Levites, the *kohanim*), holy places (the Land of Israel, Jerusalem, the Temple Mount), and holy times (Sabbath, holidays, Sabbatical and Jubilee years). The very language of the Bible (Hebrew) is said to be holy. More categories of holiness in Judaism could surely be named (such as holy objects, holy texts, etc.), but now is not the place to mention all of them. For our purposes, what is important is that Halevi and Rambam each consistently approached the idea of *kedusha* in opposite but predictable ways; the way they understood *kedusha* will have major ramifications for how they viewed prayer as well. As our primary example, let us now see how they both dealt with "holiness of place."

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38. *Moreh* 1:1.

Is there something intrinsic about the Land of Israel that makes it different than all other places? Is there something in its soil or climate making it the "Holy Land"? Or is it simply a place that is essentially like any other, but it became holy because God chose it to be the place where the Jewish people would live and fulfil His Torah? In other words, was the Land of Israel *chosen* because it is *holy*, or is it *holy* because it was *chosen*? When God chooses a land, does that automatically change its essential nature? An excellent book called *The Land of Israel in Medieval Jewish Thought* was recently published;<sup>39</sup> though the theme indicated by its title is often complex, the contradictory positions of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi and Rambam were not hard to predict. Halevi held that something about the Land of Israel is intrinsically different from all other places. He even used medieval theories current in his time regarding the effects of different climates on the quality of human inhabitants in different places to prove that Israel has the best "spiritual climate" for prophecy in the world! Rambam, on the other hand, without compromising his deep love for the Land of Israel in any way, held that it is not really "essentially" different than other land. Rather, its importance derives from the fact that it was chosen by God to be Israel's home.<sup>40</sup>

The difference between what might be called "intrinsic" holiness (for Halevi) versus "incidental" holiness (for Rambam) comes into play in other areas as well. What do we mean, for instance, when we call the Jews a "holy people"? It is well known that Halevi proposed a distinction between the descendants of Abraham and all other men that seems almost "biological" in nature. The *Kuzari* praises the Khazar king's decision to convert to Judaism, but from the very beginning the Jewish scholar in the book makes it clear that converts can never be equal to born Jews. The Torah would not have been given to the Jews specifically unless they were somehow different from the other nations God created.<sup>41</sup> The difference, according to Halevi, is that only Jews have the inborn ability to achieve prophecy. Non-Jews cannot.

Rambam, on the other hand, saw no intrinsic difference between Jews and anyone else, just as he found no innate distinction between the Land of Israel and any other place. The Jews are a holy people because they accepted God's Torah with all of the obligations that it entails. God gave them extra mitzvot that other nations don't share, but they are not in and

39. Ed. Moshe Hallamish and Aviezer Ravitzky (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1991).

40. See the article in the aforementioned book by Abraham Melamed, "The Land of Israel and Climatology in Jewish Thought," pp. 52-78. On page 59 he wrote: "This fact fits well with Rambam's position that the uniqueness of the Land is not intrinsic to the Land, but derives from the uniqueness of the people, which accepted the Torah."

Also see Rambam's rational and completely "non-essential" explanation for Abraham's choice of the Temple Mount and the location of the Holy of Holies in *Moreh* 3:45.

41. See *Kuzari* 1:27.



of themselves on a "higher" level. Though the mitzvot of the Torah are conducive to intellectual perfection, any non-Jew can also reach that level.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, every non-Jew has both the ability and the right to accept the Torah and take its obligations upon himself, and after he does so he is no different than any other Jew (contrary to Halevi).

The same general approach holds true for the idea of Hebrew as the "holy language"<sup>43</sup> and for a host of other topics. Halevi tended to treat *kedusha* as something innate and intrinsic, while Rambam viewed it as a legal status imposed from the outside by the Torah. But the disagreement goes even deeper, to the very commandments of God. Both Rambam and Halevi explained the reasons for many mitzvot in their writings, but they began from opposite assumptions: Halevi tried to find an "intrinsic" explanation for each mitzva, one that could give it eternal value, and even found "essential" reasons for many of their detailed halakhic regulations. But Rambam often proposed explanations for mitzvot that are not "innate" reasons to perform them, but simply circumstantial reasons that were relevant at the time when the Torah was given. He was willing to say that many mitzvot are not important in and of themselves, but for the "primary intention" that they only contribute towards indirectly. Nor did it bother him to admit that there might be no deeper reason for the practical details of a mitzva.<sup>44</sup> The best known example is that he viewed the sacrifices to be necessary only for the general purpose of weaning people away from idolatrous practices.<sup>45</sup>

To reapply an old term in a new way to the debate between these two thinkers, it may be said that Rabbi Yehuda Halevi was an "essentialist," while Rambam was a "non-essentialist," but with one vital exception. That exception is intellectual perfection gained through the study of philosophy, for which their positions are exactly reversed. Rambam saw "essential" value in intellectual perfection, and in the study of rational philosophy which leads to it, but in nothing else. For him, intellectual perfection is what gives ultimate meaning to the Torah. But for Halevi the reverse was true: he found "essential" value in the Torah and all of its mitzvot, but not in rational philosophy.

It is partly because of Halevi's "essentialism" that his writings were so well appreciated in later generations, especially by those who were drawn to the kabbala. The kabbala almost always stipulated "essential" value to all the details of the mitzvot, and thus it had a natural affinity to the thought

42. For a full discussion of this, see Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991).

43. For some of the views on this, see the numerous sources mentioned in chapter eight, note 40.

44. See *Moreh* 3:27 on mitzvot meant to perfect man's character. See 3:26 on the details of the mitzvot. On all of this, see Yitzhak Heinemann, *Ta'amei ha-Mitzvot be-Sifrut Yisrael*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Horeb, reprinted 1993). It should also be pointed out that, in contradistinction to Halevi, Rambam found no "intrinsic" spiritual reality in the laws of *tuma* and *tahara* (ritual impurity and purity).

45. *Moreh* 3:32.

of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi. Rambam's philosophical writings, however, aroused fierce opposition, partly because of his assertion that many mitzvot (as well as "holiness") had no intrinsic worth, as we described above. There is a natural and understandable tendency for religious people to want the practices that they live by to have some "innate" and eternal value in all of their details, and not just be practical concessions or pragmatic means to a higher goal, as Rambam described them. This was an underlying cause of the fierce opposition to Rambam's philosophy.

Before seeing how the fundamental difference in attitudes between Halevi and Rambam impacted on their views on prayer, let me make it clear that my characterization of Halevi as an "essentialist" and Rambam as a "non-essentialist" when it comes to interpreting the mitzvot (and "holiness") has not been conclusively proven. I do not claim that it will always hold true as an absolute rule throughout their writings. I only assert that it is often a useful tool for clarifying their opinions, and that it does hold true for their views on prayer.

Indeed, everything we have said so far applies fully to Halevi's and Rambam's respective attitudes towards prayer. Halevi idealized prayer together with the details concerning its proper time and content, and tried to show how the rabbinic rules for prayer have "essential" value for all people, especially for the *hasid* (pious man) who has reached a high spiritual level. But Rambam (at least in his philosophic writings) described prayer as a concession to human inadequacies, and even hinted that men who reached the highest levels of intellectual achievement might not really need it any longer (at least not in its conventional form). With this rough comparison as an introduction, let us now study their views on prayer one at a time, beginning chronologically with Halevi.

Rabbi Yehuda Halevi devoted a major section of his *Kuzari* to describing how a *hasid* serves God at a time when the Jewish people lives in exile and the primary "service" of God, namely the Temple worship, is no longer extant. Today (as opposed to during Temple times), a *hasid's* way of life revolves around prayer and holy times (the Sabbath and Festivals). Though the life of a *hasid* today is only a pale reflection of what it might have been had he lived during Temple times, his current practices should still not be thought of as "compromises" or inadequate "substitutions" for the Temple service: even for a *hasid* during Temple times, who had the means to serve God on a higher level, prayer and the Sabbath were still of major importance for his way of life and his service of God. It is just that today, prayer and holy times are the only aspects of that service that still remain.<sup>46</sup>

Halevi began describing the life of a *hasid* by rejecting the ascetic ideal, at least as a practical choice for most human beings. He admitted that two specific kinds of people can benefit by withdrawing from society and from the physical distractions of the world. The first were certain prophets who

46. Eliezer Shweid exaggerates this point; see "Ha-Tefilla be-Mahshavto shel Rabbi Yehuda Halevi" in Cohn, pp. 136-137. Prayer does not replace the Temple worship according to Halevi. Rather, it is the only part of that worship left to us.

rejected physical life because they already reached the highest level possible for a living person; they do not need the company of other people because their companionship is with the angels. The second group are philosophers such as Socrates, who found that ascetic withdrawal serves them in their intellectual contemplation. However, both the prophets and philosophers were rare exceptions, and Halevi asserted that it is impossible to reach their levels nowadays.

Furthermore, the philosophers didn't withdraw from human contact completely; rather, they sought to remain with their students, whose questions and criticisms continually prodded them towards new ideas and truths. And even the prophets of Temple times stayed together with others like themselves, so that they could reinforce each other's knowledge of the Torah. Halevi asserted that supposedly pious people who withdraw from society nowadays are really just misleading themselves: they think that this makes them more holy, but it does not. In reality, by denying their bodily needs and their social need for companionship, they wind up despising the lives they lead and become further removed from God.

At this point, Halevi made his first mention of prayer in the life of a *hasid*. He wrote that many of these supposedly pious ascetics love to pray as much as they can. But trying to become close to God by saying as many prayers as one can find is a failing strategy, because the new prayers that one says only stir his soul in the beginning while they retain their novelty. But when he starts to recite them by force of habit they quickly lose their meaning. If Halevi had used the rabbinic terminology we learned in chapter one, he might have said that prayers that inspire *kavvana* still become *keva* if they are repeated too many times.

After this description of what the life of a *hasid* is *not* (it is not an ascetic life), the Khazar king understandably asked the Jewish scholar to describe what it *is*. The scholar replied by mentioning Plato's description of a king who rules with justice, gives each subject his due, and makes sure that all his people function in harmony for the greater good of the kingdom and obey him absolutely. Plato's king is a model for the way a *hasid* is in absolute control of himself, directing his physical body and all the aspects of his personality towards the service of God with complete authority. Halevi described how the *hasid* "takes control of himself" in great detail, and in the end we find that all of this is really the necessary preparation for prayer. Halevi's is the only full description of the *preparation* needed to pray with *kavvana* in the entire literature of medieval Jewish philosophy.

How does the *hasid* prepare himself to pray? He bridles his pride and anger, his five physical senses, his powers of imagination and reasoning and thought and memory, and his worldly longings.<sup>47</sup> All of these, along with his physical body, must be given reign to exercise their abilities within measure, and fed whatever they need to function within their proper limits. But they must all serve the decisions of the intellect. The *hasid* must take

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47. Similarly, in *Kuzari* 1:60 he wrote that a person who is sunk into worldly affairs will have a hard time achieving *kavvana* for prayer.

full control over them all as a king does over his subjects, ordering each of them to serve one common goal: raising the *hasid* to a level even higher than intellectual perfection, which is only a human achievement. The level he strives to reach is even greater than the highest human level: he attempts to imitate, and thus touch, the level of the Divine.

All of this is tied in with Halevi's basic assumptions about "levels" in the world. He accepted the classic philosophic division of the world into (1) inanimate objects, (2) plants, (3) animals, and (4) humans, whereby humans are distinguished from animals by their intelligence and ability to speak. Each level achieves its perfection by striving to imitate the level above it. But Halevi added a fifth level: Israel, which alone has the added ability to achieve prophecy and thereby cling to the Divine. To achieve the level of prophecy (or at least a taste of it) is the true purpose of Jewish prayer.

In prayer, the *hasid* must first perfect himself as a human being (this is the idea of "ruling" himself and subjecting himself to his intellect), and then use all of his powers to reach above his humanity by imitating the level of the Divine. He must turn his thoughts away from worldly matters, not allowing his reason to distract him with doubts about his purpose. His emotions and desires must not be allowed to distract him either. The limbs of his body must be made to perform the necessary movements for prayer (such as bowing). His mouth must say the words. A *hasid's* speech always matches his thoughts, and this goes for prayer as well. He never says words without really meaning them.

But the *hasid's* most important tool for reaching the Divine during prayer is his *imagination*. The stress Halevi put on the importance of imagination for intense prayer may be the most distinctive aspect in his idea of *tefilla*. Since Halevi believed that reaching toward a higher level is achieved by *imitating* that level, imagination has a central purpose in prayer: the *hasid* prepares himself to pray by imagining the greatest moments of prophetic glory that have been preserved in the memory of the Jewish people, such as the revelation at Sinai, or sacrificial services at the Tabernacle of Moses and the Temple in Jerusalem, during which God's Presence was visible. By calling these images to mind and concentrating on them, the *hasid* imitates the experience of prophecy and thereby brings himself higher than the level of Man and comes closer to the level of a prophet.

Halevi returned to the importance of imagination in prayer when he described how the *hasid* says the specific blessings that make up rabbinic prayer. For instance, in the blessing of "*Yotzer ha-Meorot*," which praises God as the Creator of the cosmos, the *hasid* visualizes the glory of the heavens and then considers that they are nothing compared to the might and power of God. He can add a further element of meaning to the blessing by visualizing God's tiny creations, realizing that an ant or a bee is far more complex than any of the heavenly bodies, and they are even greater revelations of God's wisdom because their marvellous intricacies are contained in such small vessels.

The imagination can be used to add meaning to other blessings in similar ways. When the *hasid* says the rabbinic blessings for pleasure or benefit that he enjoys (*birkhot ha-nehenin*), his pleasure will be enhanced if he uses his

imagination during the blessing, and the blessing itself will be more meaningful. For example, when he says a blessing for food he should imagine what it would be like if he wasn't blessed with food. This will both enhance his pleasure for the food he eats and create a true emotional need to thank God, who blessed him with the food. When the *hasid* says the blessing *she-heheyanu* ("Blessed are You . . . who has kept us alive and preserved to reach this time") he should imagine himself facing imminent death, and then his appreciation of being alive at a joyous time will be infinitely greater and he will truly mean the words that he says in the blessing. When he says the blessing in the *Amida* asking God to re-establish the Temple service and "let us see Your merciful return to Zion" he should call up a visual image of the Jewish people bowing to the Divine Presence when it was revealed to them in the Temple, and bow as they did with this image in his mind. This last example is yet another illustration of how the imagination serves as a tool for imitating prophecy.

Halevi wrote what a person should think about during all of the important daily blessings (the blessings of *Shema* and the *Amida*), and his comments amount to a brief commentary and guide to those parts of the siddur. For our purposes, it is important that he finds an "essential" value in every one of them. All of the blessings are integral parts of the *hasid's* way of life, and each one is indispensable as he tries to come closer to the level of prophecy. Saying that the rabbinic blessings have "essential" value does not mean that rote recitation of the words has any value,<sup>48</sup> but that prayer as the rabbis decreed *with kavvana* is indispensable for coming closer to prophecy. Prayer itself is essential for the *hasid*, but Halevi made it clear that saying the words without *kavvana* is simply not prayer.

While the Jews are in exile, and the Holy Land is not part of their lives, it is the "holiness of time" (*kedushat ha-zeman*) that allows a *hasid* to bring himself closer to prophecy. Halevi tied prayer together with *kedushat ha-zeman*, and saw its power and value as deriving from that relationship. Jewish law requires prayer at certain times, and for Halevi *when* a person must pray is no less important than *what* he must say.

Of all the ideas Halevi expressed about prayer, his most famous and oft-quoted remark is that the soul needs nourishment from prayer like the body needs nourishment from food. After a person eats a meal he is strengthened, and the nourishment is enough to carry him through until the next meal. So too regarding prayer: Prayer purifies the soul and raises it; its spiritual "nourishment" is powerful enough to last until the next time for prayer, despite the fact that the soul cannot avoid being sullied and lowered by its involvement in mundane affairs in the meantime. But each time he is thus lowered, a Jew is soon brought back up to "prophetic imitation" when he prays again, and becomes spiritually refreshed.

But despite the spiritual nourishment offered by prayer at regular times, the soul still cannot avoid being dragged far from the level of prophecy during the course of a week. The Sabbath, therefore, provides it with an

48. Halevi ridiculed rote recitation in 3:5.

even greater dose of spiritual cleansing and nourishment. The same is true to an even greater extent of the holidays, and most of all for the once-a-year experience of *Yom ha-Kippurim*.

By linking prayer with *kedushat ha-zeman*, Halevi showed that prayer, the Sabbath and the holidays all share one common purpose: to insure that a person has regular opportunities to remove his soul from mundane human affairs and apply himself towards imitating the experience of prophecy. Thus, it would be fair to include Halevi's vision of prayer within the rubric of "self-training," as we did earlier with Bahya and Albo. However, the specific kind of self-training that Halevi advocates is unique: a complete marshalling of all the physical, emotional, and intellectual aspects of a human being to imitate a level higher than humanity, namely the level of prophecy, which has direct contact with God.

Halevi's definition of *kavvana* is that every aspect of a human being is totally dedicated towards achieving this goal. It is not just an intellectual cognizance of what he says when he prays, nor even an emotional empathy with the words, but a vital struggle to put *all* of his faculties as one into the idea he is expressing. But even though every human power has some role to play in achieving this goal, the role played by the imagination is especially important.

We saw that for Halevi, the times and texts of the rabbinic prayers are essential towards achieving the state of what might be called "prophetic imitation." But what about the *place* of Jewish prayer? It would seem that Halevi's ideal type of prayer would be easiest to realize in isolation, rather than together with the community in the synagogue.

Halevi was fully aware of this question, and put it into the mouth of the Khazar king. The first answer the Jewish scholar gave the king is that if individuals pray only for themselves they are likely to ask for things which could be detrimental to others, and prayer is only supposed to be for things that are to the benefit of all. Secondly, he reminded the king that every person is part of a collective whole, the community. The community is like an organism, and each individual is only one organ or limb. The individual must render to the community its fair portion of his possessions by giving tithes, and its portion of his time by refraining from business on Sabbath and holidays. He also renders a service to the community with his speech, namely prayer. Prayer is for the greater good of all.<sup>49</sup>

Public prayer is more effective than private prayer, and God is more likely to answer it. This is because there is seldom an individual whose prayer is perfect in every way. But if he prays as part of a collective whole, then "some members of the community will contribute whatever is lacking by the others . . . and a perfect prayer with pure *kavvana* will issue from all of them together, and blessing will reach all of them, and every individual will have a portion in it."<sup>50</sup> By contributing to the community when he

49. Halevi's stress on public prayer led him to go further than the standard halakha by saying that individual petitions are *only* allowed during *Shema Kolenu*.

50. *Kuzari* 3:19.

prays for the greater good of all, the individual will also benefit as part of the community when God answers the prayer.

It seems from this that according to Halevi, prayers are literally granted by God. He did mention prayer being answered a few times.<sup>51</sup> But when it comes to the philosophic impossibility of “influencing” God, which was so crucial to Albo’s idea of prayer, it appears that Halevi was simply not bothered by the question. It is unclear how he would have answered it.

Every time Halevi mentioned God’s response to prayer, however, he used the passive: the pray-er “will be answered” or the blessing “will occur” to him. There is never an active statement about God *deciding* to answer prayer. Similarly, at an earlier point in the *Kuzari*, Halevi wrote:

The Divine waits and watches for one who is fitting to receive it—like the prophets and the *hasidim*—to befall him and be his God; just as intelligence waits and watches for one whose natural characteristics are perfect and whose soul and his traits are in balance—like the philosophers—to befall him completely; just as life waits and watches for something whose physical potential has reached a completeness that is ready to greet a higher level—like the animals—to befall it; just as nature waits and watches for conditions that have reached a certain balance—to befall it so that these conditions will become a plant.<sup>52</sup>

Likewise, in his discussion of prayer, Halevi wrote of blessing “befalling” a community that is worthy to receive it through its prayer, or of *hashgaha* reaching those who are ready to receive it. It is impossible to know for sure, but it is likely that he may have implicitly assumed something akin to the views that Rabbi Yosef Albo formulated in greater detail three centuries later. Halevi may have felt that prayer, by imitating the experience of prophecy and bringing a person into contact with the Divine, in and of itself makes his prayer worthy of the attention of the Divine and makes him worthy of being answered.

This is only an educated guess at Halevi’s assumptions about how prayer is “answered.” But whether it is correct or not, one thing about the philosophical paradoxes of prayer can be said with certainty: They are simply not important to Halevi’s view of prayer. Albo was preoccupied by the paradoxes because he approached prayer from the point of view of its being answered. But for Halevi, since prayer’s true purpose has to do with imitating prophecy, and not “influencing” God to receive gifts, the philosophical paradoxes of prayer lose their sting.

But Halevi did address one paradox directly. Earlier in this chapter we posed the question, “God knows our thoughts and realizes what we need or want even if we do not pray. So why pray?” As we saw earlier, Rabbenu Bahya Ibn Pakuda first answered this question by claiming that we pray not

51. See 3:17, 18, and 19 (twice).

52. 2:14. I am grateful to Eliezer Shweid (ibid.) for this reference.

to make God aware of our needs (He knows them anyway) but to make ourselves more aware of our utter dependence on Him.

Halevi dealt with the problem differently. His whole book is based on the assumption that action, how one *lives*, is more important than how he *thinks*. At the very beginning of his book, the Khazar king had a dream where he was told that "Your intentions are pleasing to God, but your actions are not pleasing." It was because of this dream that he sought out a rational philosopher and two clerics (a Christian and a Muslim), in the hope that they could tell him the right way to live. Only after they failed did he call in the Jewish scholar, whose conversation makes up the bulk of the book.

Halevi ended the *Kuzari* on exactly the same note. The Khazar king wishes the Jewish scholar success in his effort to reach the Land of Israel, where he will be able to serve God fully. He tells the scholar: "God knows your sincere intentions, since everything is revealed to Him." And in his very last comment, the Jewish scholar replies that "sincere intentions" only have value by themselves when action is impossible. But since man is normally free in the areas of intent *and* action, he must serve God with both. Therefore, a sincere desire to live in the Holy Land is not enough by itself; a person actually has to *go* there. He then continued: "The mitzvot must be done completely [with both intention and action] if they are to be worthy of reward, just like the intentions of prayer must be given full expression through supplication and request. For only when intent and action are both complete will they be rewarded" (5:27). In other words, the inner idea of a sincere prayer is given physical reality by speech. This is why it must be spoken aloud.

To conclude our survey of Halevi's views on prayer, let us sum up his responses to the questions on prayer we posed in chapter three. We just concluded his views on the philosophical paradoxes of prayer, noting that they are not very important to him because he is far more concerned with prayer as an imitation of prophecy than as a way to ask God for things. As for what makes a prayer or a pray-er worthy of being answered, the answer is *kavvana* and nothing else. Halevi never discussed why even prayers with "perfect" *kavvana* are so often not answered.

Praying together with the community also contributes towards its being answered, because the community as a unit can reach a higher level of perfection in its prayer than any individual can on his own. What one should pray for is, similarly, the needs of the collective; that is why all of the rabbinic blessings are in the plural. In general, the topics of the rabbinic blessings of supplication are an adequate summary of what it is right to ask God for. It is permissible to ask God for one's personal needs in addition to this, but that is not a high level of prayer. And one should certainly never pray for something that might harm someone else.

But the highest level in Halevi's kind of prayer has nothing to do with petition. It is clear that for him, petition is not the central aspect of prayer. Rather, the *hasid* aims to make his prayer into a taste of prophecy and an experience of the Divine. To accomplish this, his imagination is his most important tool. For Halevi, prayer is "essential" to the *hasid* because it is



what raises him to a level beyond the human limitations and lets him touch the Divine.<sup>53</sup>

Our survey of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi's view on prayer is now complete. But before we turn to Rambam, a final point about Halevi: The views and ideas he expressed about prayer are all harmonious and consistent with each other. This made it easy to articulate definite conclusions about them. But Rambam's philosophic comments about prayer are much harder to reconcile with each other; perhaps the only thing that can be said about them is that they have little in common with Halevi's views! Nothing Rambam wrote has anything to do with prayer being an attempt to imitate or relive past experiences of prophecy. (We will see that according to Rambam prayer and prophecy are related, but prayer is hardly an imaginative "imitation.") In complete contrast to Halevi's clear idea of prayer, Rambam's views on prayer are exceedingly hard to understand because he depicted two opposing, contradictory concepts of prayer in his writings, and stated both of them with complete conviction.

Rambam's halakhic writings (his *Commentary on the Mishna*, *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, *Mishneh Torah*, and various letters and responsa) all deal with prayer in one way: the "simple" way, based on the social analogy. The "philosophy" of prayer reflected in these works is the same in its basic assumptions as what we learned earlier about biblical and rabbinic prayer. Prayer is based on the social analogy. We find no mention of the philosophical paradoxes, and no mental gymnastics to solve them. Rambam does not redefine prayer as an imitation of prophecy like Halevi, nor as a self-training exercise like Bahya and Albo. One prays to God in the hope that He will listen and respond, not to change himself. This is simple prayer.

Rambam explicitly wrote that God answers our prayers when he finds us worthy numerous times in his *Commentary on the Mishna* and in *Mishneh Torah*. We will cite a few examples; they are all based on explicit rabbinic passages and do not differ from their sources in any significant way. Rambam wrote that God responds to the prayers of a sincere penitent: "he cries out and is answered immediately" (*Hilkhos Teshuva* 7:7) and said exactly the same thing about a person who has suffered verbal abuse (*Hilkhos Mehira* 14:18). Rambam promised that "the prayer of the community is always answered" (*Hilkhos Tefilla* 8:1). God answers the prayers of those who respond to the needs of others, measure for measure: "Whoever gives food and drink at his table to poor people and orphans—he calls to God and He will answer him" (*Hilkhos Matenot Aniyyim* 10:16). All of these

53. In 3:21, Halevi used this idea to explain why there is little reference to the World to Come in the rabbinic prayers. The answer is basically that true prayer is the World to Come. If a person was so close to God in this world, he need not worry about closeness to God in the next world. The parable Halevi told to illustrate this point is well worth reading.

Also, as we conclude our survey of Halevi's idea of prayer, a point made by Schweid should be made here as well, namely that the kind of prayer Halevi described in the *Kuzari* is reflected in the prayers that he himself composed. A full understanding can only be gained by studying those prayers along with the *Kuzari*.

examples were collected in a superb article by Marvin Fox that describes and tackles the contradiction in Rambam's view of prayer that we mentioned above.<sup>54</sup> We will return to Fox's solution below, but for now the important point is that petitionary prayer is meant literally in Rambam's halakhic writings. There is no difference between what the *mitpallel* says when he begs God for help and what he really means.

At this point, Rambam's views on prayer seem crystal clear. If this was all he wrote on the topic, we would happily end our discussion now. But students of Rambam's philosophical writings (especially *Moreh ha-Nevukhim*) are well aware that the attitudes Rambam expresses in them are often very different from what he wrote in his halakhic works, and it is usually terribly hard to reconcile them. The most blatant discrepancies are the reasons he offered for the mitzvot in the *Moreh*. There he often took a mitzva that he had earlier described in traditional terms in *Mishneh Torah* or elsewhere, with no hint whatsoever that it was to be understood other than according to its traditional meaning, and proceeded to give it an entirely new (and far less "ideal") explanation. Sometimes these new "reasons" for the mitzvot have an explicit basis in rabbinic literature, but far more often they do not: instead, Rambam offered his "reasons" for the mitzvot based on his philosophic interpretation of rabbinic passages, or based on his logic alone.

In general, how are the discrepancies between Rambam's halakhic writings and philosophic writings—more specifically, between *Mishneh Torah* and the *Moreh*—to be reconciled? This question has been the most intractable problem in Rambam's philosophy ever since he wrote the *Moreh*. Some went so far as to suggest that Rambam never wrote the most troubling passages in the *Moreh* at all (in other words, they are forgeries). But there is no basis for this view other than the need to avoid troubling questions. Others suggested that Rambam's "true" views are those of the philosopher, while his halakhic works were meant for consumption by the masses who were not ready to digest the deeper meaning of the Torah. This view has some basis in passages of the *Moreh*, but it seems too facile: it simply rejects one of Rambam's faces in favor of the other instead of reconciling them.

Reconciliation is the hardest way to deal with the apparent contradictions in Rambam's writings. But it also carries the potential for the greatest rewards. It would be cheap to claim that any one technique can solve all the contradictions; this has been tried in the past, but it has never been satisfactory. Rather, each contradiction must be discussed on its own terms, the dialectic between Rambam's two views on the topic must be appreci-

54. "Ha-Tefilla be-Mahshavto shel ha-Rambam" in Cohn, pp. 165–166 (nn. 8–9, 12–13). These are Fox's references: *Commentary on the Mishna*, *Berakhot* 4:2, 4:4–5, 4:9, 9:4; *Sota* 7:5; *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhhot Teshuva* 2:4, 7:7; *Hilkhhot Mattenot Aniyyim* 10:3, 10:16; *Hilkhhot Tefilla* 8:1, 15:7; *Hilkhhot Ta'anit* 1:1–4; *Hilkhhot Mehira* 14:18. Fox also notes God's decision being "influenced" by repentance in *Hilkhhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 10:4.

ated and not minimized, and any "reconciliation" must be offered with hesitation and humility.

Rambam began his philosophic critique of prayer in the first treatise of the *Moreh*, a treatise whose overall purpose is to explain how biblical anthropomorphisms should be "correctly" understood. There, Rambam made it clear there that God can never truly be described in human terms. All we can really say about God is what he is *not*: He is not corporeal; He is not subject to "influence" by any outside force; His power and His knowledge have no limits; etc. This, in a nutshell, is Rambam's idea of describing God through "negative attributes" alone.

But the Bible does describe God in active, positive ways, and we do the same thing when we pray. Rambam dealt with this fact by calling it a practical compromise: People must be taught that God exists and that He is perfect, but at first they will not accept this unless it is described to them in human terms. So the Torah describes God with positive attributes even though they are not truly appropriate to Him, at least not according to their conventional meanings. But when a person knows how to interpret the Torah's descriptions of God properly, he will see that no "human" meanings are really implied. This is the meaning of the rabbinic statement that "the Torah speaks in the language of man" (*Berakhot* 31b).<sup>55</sup>

To return to prayer: We cannot really describe God, and when the Torah does so it is really only a practical compromise. The same is true of the anthropomorphic nature of prayer based on the social analogy. But it is forbidden to take the compromise too far. Rambam sharply criticized the *payyetanim* who composed liturgical poems of praise, claiming that their works often bordered on heresy. He cited a talmudic passage to show that the only praises we may recite are those that the Men of the Great Assembly included in the prayers for the sake of the common people. Even they only gave themselves permission to quote praises already said by Moses in the Torah. We today have no right to recite additional praises, much less to compose them, because they are detrimental to our understanding of God (*Moreh* 1:59).

In the passage on prayer from the first treatise of the *Moreh* that we are discussing, Rambam twice hinted that the conventional view of prayer "influencing" God is absurd. Once he mentioned the philosophical assumption that God cannot be influenced, and later he ridiculed the *payyetanim* who included flowery descriptions of God by saying that such men employed exaggerated praises "in their delusion that they could arouse God to action." But Rambam's hints about the inadequacy of traditional prayer

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55. *Moreh* 1:26. In its original talmudic context, "the Torah speaks in the language of man" seems to have meant something entirely different: it meant that the Torah uses language the same way that people do, and it should be read the same way we would read a "human" text.

Rambam's understanding of "the Torah speaks in the language of man" stands the rabbinic passage on its head: "The Torah [only] speaks in the language of man"—but this is *not* its true meaning, and the plain meaning of anthropomorphisms must therefore be rejected!

became explicit in the *Moreh's* third treatise, and there he radically reinterpreted the meaning and purpose of prayer. Since the new reason he ascribed to prayer is inextricably linked with the reason he suggested for sacrifices, we will begin by discussing both sacrifice and prayer together.

Of all the areas of friction between *Mishneh Torah* and the *Moreh*, the best known is the major discrepancy between Rambam's two different presentations of the sacrifices. He described the sacrifices in the "traditional" sense based on the Talmud in *Mishneh Torah*, much as he did for prayer. But as we shall see, in the *Moreh* he presented them in an entirely different light. The problem of sacrifice in Rambam's thought has been discussed endlessly for centuries, and there is still no consensus about the matter. All of this is well known. But what is far less known is that everything Rambam said about the sacrifices is also true of his views on prayer. In fact, during his controversial statements about the sacrifices in the *Moreh*, he reduced the value of prayer in the very same breath.

Rambam introduced his section on the reasons for the mitzvot by stating that they often have a secondary purpose rather than a primary purpose (*Moreh* 3:32). This means that God may command us to do something just to rid us of a wrong idea or a bad trait (the secondary purpose), while His primary purpose is for us to love Him and serve Him. For instance: God did not simply to command the Jews not to sacrifice to Him, an idea they were not ready for because sacrifice was the accepted way of serving God (or, for idolaters, the gods) at that time. Instead, he "used" the existing institution of sacrifice by limiting it to one place (the Tabernacle or later the Temple). The memory of sacrificing to idols was eventually erased because the people learned that all sacrifice must only be to the one God. Furthermore, the Temple sacrifices reinforced the beliefs in the existence of God and in His unity, simultaneously destroying the idea that there is any other god to worship.

But let us go back one step. Rambam wrote that the Jews were not ready to entirely give up sacrificing at the time the Torah was given. But this lack of readiness was not limited to sacrifice; there are other mitzvot whose purpose is only secondary as well, which God allowed us to keep because it would seem absurd to us to give them up. One of them is prayer (*Moreh* 3:32):

God's great wisdom and shrewdness, which is revealed in all of His creations, did not conclude that He should command us to set aside all those types of service, to abandon them and abolish them. This would have been an idea that the mind could not entertain, because of the nature of man which always tends toward that which it is used to.

Back then, this would have been like a prophet coming in our times, calling for the service of God and saying: God commanded you not to pray to Him, and not to fast, and not to plead for his salvation during times of trouble, but instead let your service be in thought alone without action.

The implication is clear: the only true worship of God, which is the "primary" goal of the Torah, is intellectual contemplation. All the other forms of worship listed here have only a secondary purpose. (We will soon see what that purpose is.) We think of them as very spiritual, and sacrifice as less so, only because of the times that we live in and the way we have been conditioned to think.

Lest one ask why God didn't simply change people's natures so that they *would* be able to accept the "true" worship of the Divine, namely intellectual contemplation, Rambam stated that God would never miraculously change the nature of man. Not because He cannot, but because He does not desire to do so. The entire purpose of giving the Torah was so that man would follow it of his own free will, and so God designed him in a way that gave him other options. In other words, the fact that mankind has to accept new ideas gradually is an essential condition of his free will.

Rambam did differentiate between sacrifice and the other forms of worship (prayer, fasting, etc.), but the difference is only one of degree. By virtue of the fact that they are less physical, they are closer than sacrifice to the primary goal of intellectual worship. For this reason, they are allowed anywhere and at any time, unlike sacrifice which had to be severely limited. But even granting this, they still only serve a secondary purpose.

After this introduction to the reasons for the mitzvot, Rambam devoted one chapter to each class of mitzvot, and explained their reasons. The very first chapter is on mitzvot of belief (3:36), and there Rambam gave the reason for prayer. Mitzvot of belief include belief in God's existence, His knowledge of our circumstances, and that He justly decides our fortunes in accordance with our actions (*hashgaha*). Our fate is not left up to chance. Prayer reinforces all of these beliefs, and that is its purpose. Especially during times of trouble, when a man prays he realizes that his dire circumstances are not chance but the will of God. Only by changing his ways and appealing to God for mercy can he change his fate. In this way, as Rambam explicitly states, prayer serves the same purpose as repentance. The rules regarding prayer at regular times are so that we will be constantly reminded of the beliefs basic to any Jew (3:44).

At this point we should feel the subtle contradiction between this kind of prayer and the traditional idea based on the social analogy. Rambam did not explicitly reject "simple" prayer yet, but what he failed to say is more important than what he did say: he never simply said that we pray to God so that He will answer us! Prayer is to reinforce certain beliefs, not to "influence" God's decisions. In this way, Rambam's view of prayer in the *Moreh* fits in admirably with the idea of prayer as "self-training" that we have already seen in the works of other thinkers, especially Bahya and Albo.

According to what we have said until now, prayer serves a "secondary" purpose for Rambam. It is holding correct beliefs and validating them intellectually that is the "primary" purpose of the Torah, and prayer is just one of the means to that end. But Rambam also briefly mentioned that unlike the sacrifices, prayer is "close" to the Torah's "primary" purpose, as we said. For this reason it is permitted (and even encouraged) at all places

and times. But what makes it so special? Why is it so close to the "primary" goal?

In truth, to say that prayer only served a "secondary" purpose for Rambam would be a gross oversimplification. This becomes evident at the end of the *Moreh* (3:51), where Rambam turned to people who have already achieved a deep philosophic appreciation of the Torah, and told them how they are to serve God in their lives. Prayer, as we shall see, is not just a practical pedagogical tool for improving the masses, but remains an essential part of a rabbi-philosopher's life.

Rambam wrote that a person who reaches knowledge of God (in the sense that any human being can) must spend as much time as he can in philosophic contemplation of the Divine. But focusing on God alone and freeing one's mind from worldly concerns is not easy to do at all times. There are different levels among people regarding this, and even for individuals it is a gradual process. Prayer plays an essential role in the process (3:51):

Know that all the activities of worship, such as reading the Torah, and prayer, and doing the other commandments—their entire purpose is to teach a person to occupy himself with God's commandments and turn away from worldly matters, as if you only occupied yourself with God and abandoned everything besides Him. . . .

Let me now begin to guide you in the proper training and study, so that you can achieve this great goal. The first thing you must begin to do is to keep your thoughts from anything else when you read the *Shema* and when you pray. Do not make do with *kavvana* during *Shema* for [just] the first verse, or for the first blessing during prayer. When you become accustomed to this and it is within your power for many years, then begin putting your whole heart and soul into what you hear or read every time you read the Torah. After this too is within your grasp for some time, accustom yourself to clear your mind for whatever you read from the other books of the prophets, even for all of the blessings; mean what you say in them and ascertain their significance. . . .

When these forms of worship become pure for you and you apply your thought to them when you do them, clear of any thought about worldly matters . . . when you are alone with no one else, and when you are awake on your bed, be very careful not to apply your thoughts to anything else but cognitive worship during those special times. Namely, to come close to God and stand before Him in the true way I have made known to you.

So prayer trains a person to concentrate only on God and nothing else. Once he has learned to do this when he prays, he will be able to contemplate God intellectually at other times without being distracted.

But there is an even greater level, one that was reached by the Patriarchs and Moses: for a person to always be contemplating God, even when he is involved in worldly matters, never stopping his contemplation even for a

moment. For such men, prayer was only a stepping stone, but it was not something to be abandoned even when they reached their levels of near-perfection.

Rambam also wrote that intellectual contemplation explains *hashgaha*. Why should a purely intellectual God have any concern for man's affairs? And if He is concerned for us, then why do the righteous suffer? Both of these questions can be answered by the assertion that God's concern for man is exactly according to his intellectual level. God is intelligence, and His *shefa* clings to the only intelligence it finds in this world, namely the human mind. But a man's level of intelligence is acquired through study and contemplation; it is not innate. Whoever has achieved a higher level of true understanding will have closer *hashgaha* than those still on lower levels. Furthermore, the level of *hashgaha* can change at any given moment: even a great scholar loses much (or all) of his *hashgaha* when his mind is occupied with worldly matters. Therefore, the ultimate goal of the Torah is for a person to achieve the maximum possible intellectual cognizance of God, and to cling to that awareness always. The highest level is when the Torah scholar who has also mastered philosophy is able to train himself to think of God at all times, even when he is involved in mundane affairs. A person who succeeds in doing so can say, in the words of the verse, "I am asleep, but my heart is wakeful" (Song of Songs 5:2). Though his physical presence is sometimes "asleep," his heart and mind are forever awake to God. Such a person has *hashgaha* always and will never come to harm.

This is true of intellectual contemplation. But what about prayer? What impact can prayer have on a person's fortunes if the only concern God has is for intellectual achievement? From what we have said so far, prayer really only achieves a "secondary" purpose by helping a person learn to concentrate only on God. But what about its "plain" meaning? What about the idea that God actually answers prayer, as Rambam wrote in *Mishneh Torah*?

Marvin Fox attempted to reconcile these seemingly opposite views of prayer in a subtle way. He was not content to say that Rambam's "true" views were those in the *Moreh*, and that the plain meaning of prayer was only put into the *Mishneh Torah* for those not ready or able to understand prayer on a higher level. Instead, Fox wrote that when we consider Rambam's view of prayer, we must look not only at his halakhic writings, and not only at his philosophic writings, but also at Rambam the man: at his personality. It goes without saying that he was an extremely devout Jew, with a very deep prayer-life. This was true despite its seeming inconsistency with the philosophic views he wrote of. And this realization is the key to a possible resolution.

Fox quotes an autobiographical note by Rambam, which he wrote after being saved from a sinister storm during a sea journey to the Land of Israel. To commemorate God's salvation, he wrote that he, his family, and all the people on that ship would fast and pray every year on the anniversary of the storm, "and I swore that I would sit alone on the tenth of Iyyar not seeing anyone, praying and reading all day by myself, and just as I found no one in the sea that day besides the Holy One, blessed is He, I will again see no one. . . ."

According to Fox, this commitment is far more typical of a person who believes in ordinary prayer than in the prayer of the *Moreh*. But the commitment to fast and pray was made by Rambam, the author of the *Moreh*! So the contradiction is not just a literary one, which can be resolved by saying that Rambam's "true" views are reflected in the *Moreh*, but a practical one reflected in Rambam's *life* as well. How can the devout man who fasts and prays on the tenth of Iyyar be the same one who believes that contemplating philosophy is the true service of God?

Fox suggests that while Rambam fully believed everything he wrote in the *Moreh*, he was also aware of its limitations. To his mind, the *Moreh* reflected the ultimate in *intellectual* comprehension of God, but Rambam was also deeply aware that the human intellect is vastly insufficient. While we must understand God and His Torah to the best of our mental abilities, our understanding can never be full, and for this reason even rabbi-philosophers must hold fast to its "plain" meaning alongside its philosophic meaning. In other words, those who reach the highest levels must fulfil the Torah according to their deeper understanding, but at the very same time they must continue to observe it in its basic sense, because that also meets their needs to serve God as human beings. We are not just intellect.

In Fox's interpretation of Rambam, Jews are called upon to hold two opposite views of the Torah in their minds at one and the same time, and live according to both in a difficult and often tense dialectic. This is the only way to serve God fully as creatures of the intellect and as human beings at once. But we must, because God created us as both.

Fox claimed that this basic approach can help resolve many of the apparent contradictions between Rambam as philosopher and as halakhist. I agree that it rings true, and can serve as a useful tool. However, I suggest yet another resolution, one that is more modest than Fox's because it only has the potential to resolve the prayer problem and nothing else.

The only thing that bothers me about Fox's solution, though I agree that his overall approach has great merit, is the example he quotes about Rambam's prayer after the sea journey. When I read the example, I envisioned Rambam setting aside a day of quiet mental contemplation, not traditional prayer, because he said that he would *seclude* himself on that day, and see no other people. The quote sounds much more like the meditation of the rabbi-philosopher described at the end of the *Moreh* than the traditional rabbinic prayer of the *Mishneh Torah*.

If it is true that Rambam "lived" the philosophic kind of prayer in the *Moreh*, then we are back to square one. How are to we resolve the contradiction between the two opposite kinds of prayer he described in his writings, the first of which is a plea to a personal God, and the second an exercise leading to metaphysical contemplation?

In truth, the contradiction in Rambam's writings may be narrower than Fox and others have described it. First, the passages in *Mishneh Torah* speak of prayer being "answered," but they never explicitly contradict Rambam's



assertion, also in *Mishneh Torah*,<sup>56</sup> that God cannot be “influenced.” Secondly, even in the *Moreh* it seems that prayer is answered literally, and not just for philosophers who have constant *hashgaha*. How so?

In his introduction to the *Moreh*, Rambam told his readers that if they want to understand his points in depth, they must compare the various chapters discussing related subjects. The passage on *hashgaha* at the end of the *Moreh* (3:51), which also deals with prayer, is not Rambam’s main discussion of the matter. He explicitly refers to “the chapters on *hashgaha*” earlier in the third treatise (3:17–18). There he described God’s *shefa* as intellectual, but he also explicitly said that *hashgaha* is not just for philosophers (3:18):

Any person who acquires a greater portion of that [intellectual] *shefa* according to his physical readiness and his training—his *hashgaha* will necessarily be greater, since *hashgaha* follows intelligence, as I mentioned. Therefore, Divine providence is not equal for all men. Instead, their extra *hashgaha* will be in accordance with their extra human perfection when compared to each other. According to this, God’s Providence for the prophets must be vast, according to their prophetic levels. And His providence over people who are pious and good will be according to their piety and proper action, since it is the measure of Divine *shefa* that puts words into the mouths of prophets, and this is what straightens the actions of good men and completes whatever wisdom the pious know. But fools and rebels—since they lack that *shefa*—their matters are spurned [by God] and they are considered as other species of animals: “He is like the beasts that perish” (Psalms 49:13, 21).

This means that prophets receive more *shefa* than the people they deliver their message to, but when they deliver God’s message they are also delivering some of His *shefa*, because prophecy and its content are intellectual. One who accepts the words of the prophet, therefore, also accepts God’s *shefa* to a significant degree, and attains a certain degree of *hashgaha*.

Many people who read the *Moreh* get the wrong incorrect impression that *hashgaha* is only for philosophers, and no one else, according to Rambam. Perhaps this is because they focus on the description of *hashgaha* at the end of the *Moreh* (3:51) to the exclusion of what we quoted here. In any case, it is now clear that God’s *hashgaha* also applies to “traditional” Jews who are not philosophers.

This fact may be the key to solving the discrepancy between Rambam’s two kinds of prayer. It is true that the prayer of a pious Jew brings him less *shefa* than the intellectual contemplation of a Jew who has mastered philosophy. Nevertheless, when a pious Jew prays with “traditional” *kavvana* he thinks correct ideas about God and focuses his entire being on God, and this makes him worthy of God’s *hashgaha* at that moment.

56. *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 10:4.

Perhaps part of what Rambam meant by enjoying God's protection and providence is that a pious Jew's prayer may be answered (literally) at that moment.

If I am correct, then the more traditional remarks in the *Mishneh Torah* about prayer being answered literally are not so far removed from the attitudes expressed in the *Moreh*. In both, it may not be said that prayer "influences" God; but for both, it may be said that prayer with "traditional" *kavvana* is close enough intellectual contemplation to merit God's *hashgaha*, which includes having one's prayers answered.

According to this, prayer (even the "traditional" nonphilosophic kind) prepares a person to receive God's *shefa*. Traditional prayer is not as great, or as effective, as the contemplative prayer of the rabbi-philosopher, but it brings God's *hashgaha* nonetheless, in a smaller degree.

If my reconciliation of Rambam's halakhic and philosophic comments on prayer is correct, then Rambam's view of prayer may have been similar to the mechanism for God's answering of prayer described almost three centuries later by Rabbi Yosef Albo. Albo also wrote that intellectual apprehension makes one ready to receive God's *shefa*. Of course, Albo is explicit about how the mechanism works and Rambam is not. But if I am right about Rambam, then their fundamental assumptions about prayer were nonetheless similar.

But even if I am right that for Rambam, acceptance of prayer results from receiving God's *shefa* and *hashgaha* by concentrating on Him and thinking about Him correctly, it is still absolutely clear that Rambam only thought of this as a happy side effect, not the primary goal of prayer. The ultimate goal of prayer, as he wrote towards the end of the *Moreh*, is to train a person to focus only on God. A person who never lets God leave his consciousness even for a moment, has achieved something far greater than meriting *hashgaha* and having God answer his prayers. He has succeeded in clinging to the Divine. For Rambam, that is the ultimate purpose of prayer.

To conclude, for Rambam it does seem that the need for prayer, at least in its traditional sense, is something that can be outgrown by a person as he develops intellectually. In theory it would be replaced by intellectual contemplation, even though every Jew is technically required to continue it in practice. This whole attitude is in contradistinction to Halevi's, who thought of prayer as essential to the *avoda* of people who have reached the highest spiritual levels. Thus prayer, as we said in the very beginning of our discussion, may be thought of as "essentially" important for Halevi, and "non-essential" for Rambam. For Rambam, prayer is a stepping stone towards an even higher goal. But for Halevi, the experience of prayer is inseparable from the highest experience of God.

## FROM PHILOSOPHY TO KABBALA

We have now seen what the classic works of Jewish philosophy have to say about prayer, and it is time to change direction. But as we turn to kabbalistic and hasidic ideas of prayer, we will have to make do with some basic

remarks instead of insisting on a fuller discussion like we had about prayer in rationalistic Jewish philosophy. The reason for this is surprising: it is not that there is insufficient material available on the topic, but that there is so much! When the entire written discussion of prayer in the classical works of Jewish philosophy is gathered, it is barely enough to fill a single printed volume. But there is enough material on kabbalistic prayer to fill a small library. The lack of philosophic discussion of prayer is surprising, especially when one considers that for a basic mitzva like *teshuva* (repentance), which like *tefilla* is supposed to be a continual part of man's relationship to God, there is a huge amount of non-kabbalistic material. Even the ten chapters of Rambam's *Laws of Repentance* almost entirely focus on matters that directly relate to the religious meaning of *teshuva* (if I may: to its "*kavvana*"), while his *Laws of Prayer* is mostly technical in nature. Both sections are entitled "*halakhot*," but the one on *tefilla* has the "feel" of a halakhic code much more than the one on *teshuva*. The *Laws of Prayer* is a work devoted to the rules of *tefilla* far more than to its meaning. In his philosophical works as well, Rambam wrote only the scattered references and points about prayer that we talked about earlier in this chapter. In short, Rambam had much to say about idea of repentance, its deeper meaning, but much less to say about prayer.

This basic pattern comes out in other ethical and philosophical works as well. There is a full-length book on *teshuva*, *Sha'arei Teshuva* of Rabbenu Yonah. Saadya Gaon wrote a great deal about repentance in *Emunot ve-De'ot*, but made only scattered references to prayer. Rabbenu Bahya wrote several important digressions on prayer in his *Hovot ha-Levavot*, but they were only digressions, not comprehensive analyses. When it came to *teshuva*, however, he wrote an entire *sha'ar* (one out of the book's ten). An ethical work like *Orhot Tzaddikim* has a long chapter on *teshuva*, and another on the mitzva of Torah study, and yet another on the fear of God, but only short scattered references to prayer. The only major exception to this rule was Rabbi Yosef Albo, who devoted more time and space to prayer than to repentance: eight chapters as opposed to only four. But even Albo's example only makes the same point more sharply: when we consider that his eight chapters on prayer constitute the *only* comprehensive essay devoted to the philosophy of prayer in *all* of medieval Jewish philosophy, and that even his discussion of prayer is dwarfed by the amount of space he devotes to other topics in his book, it is the *lack* of attention devoted to prayer and its theoretical problems in rational Jewish thought that becomes clear.

It is not easy to explain this huge discrepancy between the scant attention paid to the meaning of prayer in all non-kabbalistic works (whether philosophical or not) versus the major preoccupation with it in kabbalistic ones. On the one hand, it is possible that most *talmidei hakhamim* in the Middle Ages were overwhelmingly concerned with understanding the Bible, Midrash, Talmud, and halakhic decisors, focusing neither on prayer's philosophy nor on its kabbalistic meanings. For such scholars, the idea behind prayer didn't require any elaborate explanation, because it was easily understood by them and most other Jews on the basis of the social

analogy. This is not to say that such men did not encounter problems of rote prayer, but to them the obvious way to tackle these problems was with exhortations about the need for *kavvana*. No investigation into the deeper meaning of prayer was necessary. Books to explain the concept behind *tefilla* were not needed, because it was easily understood by all.

Perhaps those scholars who were devoted to rational philosophy and its “educational” explanation for prayer found that explanation, in all of its simplicity and elegance, to be completely sufficient. The “educational” view of prayer—namely that prayer is meant to impact on the pray-er and not on God—is easy to understand and explain, and perhaps that is why there are not so many pages devoted to making it understood!

When it comes to kabbala, however, there is a tremendous amount of material on prayer. Nonetheless, I will attempt nothing more than a minimal overview of it. This is partly because of the limited scope of this book. We are concerned about “rote versus meaning” in prayer, and therefore it was crucial to understand the overall “educational” theories of it, each of which explains prayer as a whole. Clearly, it will also be crucial to understand the general implications of the kabbala for prayer. But while the rational approach explains the whole idea of prayer with one brief and uncomplicated insight (while “standing on one foot,” so to speak), the essence of the kabbalistic approach to prayer is mostly in its details. Indeed, if there is a small library’s worth of material on kabbalistic prayer from pre-modern times, it is because most of that material is devoted to the *details* of that sort of prayer in addition to its overall theme. Those details, however, are far beyond the scope of this book.

As yet we’ve hardly begun our survey of kabbalistic prayer, but with this last point we have already said the most important thing about it. Remember that for the philosopher, the overall impact of prayer on the pray-er is what is important, not the exact words he says or the rules he follows when he prays. But for the *mekubbal*, every detail and every word (and perhaps even every letter) has enormous consequences. Thus, the fact that kabbala always focused on the *practical details* of *tefilla* to an astounding degree tells us something fundamental about kabbalistic prayer and how it confronted the philosophic idea of prayer. In an argument about prayer with a rationalist, the *mekubbal* might say something like this: Religious education can be achieved in many different ways. So how can this one general idea of prayer as “self-training” really explain the hundreds of *halakhot* relating to prayer, and the enormous attention devoted to its text by scholars? Can there possibly be an “educational” reason for each and every one of the laws of prayer? For every word in the *siddur*? Can “training” or “education” really explain why we prefer one specific text above all others? And if the answer is no, if prayer as “self-training” does not make these details necessary, then a person might cast off the obligation to pray according to all of the traditional words and rules, perish the thought! Since this alternative is not acceptable, since the text and *halakhot* of prayer are essential aspects of the Torah, there *must* be some deeper

meaning to prayer in *all* of its details. A rational explanation of its overall purpose is insufficient.<sup>57</sup>

If anything, the *mekubbal* would say that the rational approach, with all of its simplicity and elegance, is *too* easy! He might ask the philosopher: Do you really think the idea of “self-training” through reciting prayers can explain the full experience of Jewish prayer? Can the full meaning of something as profound as prayer really be summed up in one pithy formulation? Can an intense encounter with God really be reduced to an exercise in self-improvement? How can it be that the precise structure, text, and procedures of prayer are just means to some other end, with no “essential” value in and of themselves? It is not coincidental that of all the rationalistic philosophers we surveyed earlier, only Rabbi Yehuda Halevi’s remarks about prayer are free of this criticism. Because of this, many scholars of a mystical bent have found it easy to draw on Rabbi Yehuda Halevi’s teachings in general. This is true of prayer as well, since he held that every prayer does have “essential” value (though not necessarily for kabbalistic reasons).<sup>58</sup>

Many kabbalists rejected rational philosophic prayer totally, and with great force, for all of the above reasons. But kabbala can also reject the “simple” idea of prayer based on the social analogy with no less force, and for similar reasons. It asks: How can begging for material needs be the main point of prayer? Can our relationship with God really be founded upon such mundane concerns? Such “human” pleas are entirely unable to explain the complicated structure of prayer; in fact, if the social analogy is really our guide to the experience of prayer, then prayer would be better off *without* an exact text and with less structure. In the section on rabbinic prayer, we discussed how using “the social analogy for a nation” created a constant form of *avoda* for the people without the Temple. As we saw, this is enough to justify the overall structure of rabbinic prayer, but not its smallest details, and not to mandate an exact, unchanging text. Just as the *mekubbal* can argue that is possible to argue that “educational” prayer, which is entirely concerned with its effect on the *mitpallel*, might better achieve its goals if prayer was a less formal enterprise, the same may be true for “simple” prayer.

Moreover, the kabbala was fully aware of the philosophical paradoxes

57. On kabbalistic attacks against rationalistic prayer, see Tishby, p. 256.

58. See the previous section of this chapter. It is fascinating to read Friedrich Heiler’s descriptions of many different kinds of prayer in many different religions—such as rational philosophic prayer, prophetic prayer, mystical prayer, prayer in public worship, etc.—and to realize that Judaism fits his descriptions perfectly for everything *except* mystical prayer. When it comes to mysticism, in other religions it tended to break away from fixed forms of liturgy, while in Judaism it did the exact opposite: it gave every word more sanctity than it ever had before. It “hardened” prayer-texts instead of “softening” their hold. For other religions, see Heiler’s *Prayer: A Study in the History and Psychology of Religion*, trans. and ed. Samuel McComb and J. Edgar Park (New York: Oxford University Press, reprinted 1958), pp. 178–193; 222–226.

we posed at the beginning of this chapter. Thus, the kabbala rejected simple prayer for exactly the same reasons as rationalists, but offered an alternative that would have been entirely foreign to them. Kabbala cannot tolerate the idea that the essence of an activity as important as prayer could be entirely understood and practiced according to the model of something as "this-worldly" as the social analogy of petitioning a king for physical needs. The kabbalist is entirely aware of the philosophical paradoxes, and like the philosopher he offers a substitute for the social analogy that avoids them. However, the rejection of "simple" prayer in kabbala must not be exaggerated: the history of kabbala includes a wide range of views on prayer, and we will see that at least some of them were able to incorporate aspects of the basic human needs and emotions of "simple" prayer into their worldview, grafting new and "higher" meanings onto these seemingly mundane human feelings in the process.

It is only fair that I clarify my own assumptions about the study of kabbala before going any further, since there are probably readers who do not share them. Kabbala is fundamentally a way of understanding our universe and how it relates to God. But having said this, it seems no different than philosophy! The major difference is in the sources of knowledge it draws upon: while Jewish philosophy emphasizes the conscious rational mind, kabbala learns from and emphasizes other aspects of the human personality such as desire, emotion, and especially the flashes of insight gained during meditation. It would be unfair to say that all philosophers absolutely rejected these other sources of knowledge, or that kabbala entirely rejects rational investigation, but the general stress is clear.

Thus, kabbala criticizes philosophy for focusing only on the rational mind. But in the debate between kabbala and philosophy that raged for centuries (which many of the *rishonim* took an active part in), sharper claims were made on both sides. It is well known that the word "kabbala" means "that which is received"; kabbalists claim their secret way of understanding the Torah was revealed to Moses at Sinai and then passed down from teacher to student until the Zohar was finally written down by Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai. But it is far less known that rational philosophers made precisely the same claim for *their* way of understanding the Torah and the mitzvot. Rambam, for example, developed a subtle system of interpretation devoted to proving that both biblical narratives and rabbinic *aggadot* can be "decoded" to reveal Aristotelian truths.<sup>59</sup> According to Rambam, Moses himself was a philosopher, and the "secret knowledge" studied by some talmudic sages was Aristotelian philosophy, not kabbala. Rational philosophers claimed that the deeper meaning of the Torah was revealed by their

59. See Sarah Keim-Braslavy, *Perush ha-Rambam le-Sippur Beri'at ha-Olam* (Jerusalem:Ha-Hevra ha-Yisraelit bor: la-Mikra, 1978) and *Perush ha-Rambam la-Sippurim al Adam be-Parashat Bereshit* (Jerusalem:Ha-Hevra ha-Yisraelit bor: la-Mikra, 1987); and my own unpublished "Philosophic Exegesis: Philo and Maimonides on the Fall of Man."

methods of study with no less conviction than kabbalists who made the same claim for their system.

Nor was the debate one of "all or nothing." Rambam's *Moreh ha-Nevukhim*, though it was considered the most "dangerous" philosophic work of all by the kabbalists, could not be ignored by them. Some interpreted it kabbalistically and tried to show that it was really a work of kabbala at its roots, as in Rabbi Abraham Abulafia's *Sodot ha-Moreh* (written in 1270). This was not an impossible approach, because both rational philosophy and kabbala often used similar Hebrew terms and their concepts often resembled one another, at least superficially. Others were influenced by philosophy initially and then "outgrew" it as they became attracted to kabbala and attacked it. Last, some tried to unite its philosophy with the "true knowledge" as two complementary approaches. The idea that rational philosophy and kabbala are really two complementary approaches to reality (with kabbala, of course, being the deeper and "truer" one) was used in open debates on the topic. Historically, philosophy versus kabbala was not just a simple choice between two diametrically opposed options.<sup>60</sup>

How is an average Jew supposed to respond these conflicts? What is he supposed to believe? And most importantly, how should he pray? If the "simple" idea of prayer has certain implications for how one should pray, the rational approach another set of implications, and the kabbalistic view of prayer espouses yet a third way of praying, then which model should a Jew pick if he is not equipped to decide between them? My own approach to all of these questions is to accept any way of thinking or believing that has been espoused by the great Torah scholars of the past, *Gedolai Yisrael*, as a valid one. Even when each way of thinking or believing claims that it alone is the exclusive truth, this still applies. I do *not* mean one should simplistically adopt all of them, ostensibly combining them even when they are mutually contradictory; on the contrary, each view has to be understood on its own terms, especially when it explicitly rejects the legitimacy of others. But the debate usually ends with each side retaining its integrity, and this is because each way of thinking has its own strengths and weaknesses and none of them is entirely convincing on its own (at least not

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60. Examples for all of the approaches mentioned in this paragraph are provided by Yehuda Ibn Shmuel in his General Introduction to his corrected edition of the Ibn Tibbon Hebrew translation of *Moreh ha-Nevukhim* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1981), p. 10. For a fascinating analysis of a medieval debate between a rationalist and a kabbalist, where the latter used the claim that both are true but kabbala is the deeper truth, see Aviezer Ravitzky, "Ma'amad Raglei ha-Mekubbalim be-Rashei ha-Pilosophim?" *Tarbiz* 58 (5749): 453–482; reprinted in *Al Da'at ha-Maqom* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1991).

The need to assert the "truth" of kabbala in the face of rational philosophy—and especially in the face of the great rabbinic sages (*rishonim*) who were themselves rational philosophers, Rambam chief among them—continues to this very day. It is responsible for the claim often made by Habad hasidim that Rambam was a "closet" kabbalist.

to everyone). Almost always, a final decision about which *hashkafa* is the truth depends far more on the subjective inclinations of a person who takes it upon himself to make such a decision, than on reasons that are universally convincing. In fact, the very idea that it is possible—or desirable—to pick and choose between *hashkafot*, retaining some as true and discarding others as disproven and wrong is in and of itself an approach that may be mistaken. It comes dangerously close to shallow thinking and disrespect for Torah scholars. I prefer to conclude that both philosophy and kabbala, in all of their various forms, remain “the words of the Living God.” It is our job to study each approach to the best of our ability, neither embracing any one view as the absolute truth nor entirely rejecting any one school of thought because of criticisms by another. We need not blindly acquiesce to the medieval philosophic claim that kabbala is primitive superstitious nonsense, nor should we readily accept the kabbalistic claim that philosophy is an alien implant on Judaism that inevitably leads to heresy. It usually turns out that each way of thinking emphasizes a different aspect of the truth, each revealing meaningful insights missed by the others. Each turns out to have value precisely where others are lacking. So with a good understanding of them all we can legitimately draw on each as we construct our own approaches to prayer, or for any other important issue. In the twentieth century, this was how Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kuk of blessed memory dealt with the competing claims of philosophy and kabbala.<sup>61</sup>

A frequent objection made to this approach is that since the kabbala was ultimately victorious in its debate with rational philosophy, we may assume that it is the “true” Jewish way of gaining deeper insights into the Torah (and about prayer by extension). But the premise of this argument is inaccurate, and its conclusion is unjustified. For what exactly does it mean that kabbala “won” the debate with rationalism? It is entirely true that kabbala was the dominant trend in Jewish thought from shortly after the Spanish expulsion until the Emancipation (in Jewish terms, until the mid-nineteenth century). But though the most important creative period in rational Jewish philosophy came to an end when the Jews were expelled from Spain, its classic works were never abandoned. They have been continuously studied and appreciated by Jews the world over to this very day. As Yehuda Ibn Shemuel wrote of Rambam’s *Moreh*: “It is surprising that even in the days of self-closure in the area of halakha and intensification of theoretical and practical kabbala, unique personalities from among the great halakhists studied the *Moreh*, such as the Rema [Rabbi Moshe Isserles], Rabbi Mordecai Yaffe [author of the *Levushim*], and Rabbi Yom Tov Lipmann Heller [author of *Tosafot Yom Tov* on the Mishna]. [Various European editions] brought the *Moreh* to every community and place of Torah in Jewry. The opposition [to the *Moreh*] that began anew always found its own opposition [in its defense], and even if the number of those

61. See Benjamin Ish-Shalom, *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook—Between Rationalism and Mysticism* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1990), especially part 3, pp. 195–249 (Hebrew).



studying it among the people was less—the greatest students never stopped turning to it in their thirst for higher understanding.”<sup>62</sup>

Thus, though in later times the *Moreh* was not read widely in popular study groups and taught in public *derashot* as it was in Egypt and Syria, Southern France and Italy during the Middle Ages,<sup>63</sup> the most influential Jewish philosophic work was not abandoned, either, even during the centuries when halakha and kabbala dominated as objects of study. It was continuously studied and appreciated by Jews the world over to this very day. One might imagine that a similar thing was true for other important works of rational Jewish philosophy. And in recent years such works have been the subject of growing interest and increasing popularity.

Furthermore, philosophy was dominant both before and after the kabbalistic period. Rational philosophy was the dominant way of thinking for centuries before its great debate with the kabbala began, and that debate itself lasted hundreds of years. It would be wrong to say that kabbalistic ideas should be rejected just because other ideas were in the forefront of Jewish thought for so long, but same thing is true in the opposite direction. To put it simply, there were vast periods when either one of the two was dominant, but this has no implications for either one's legitimacy. Furthermore, since the nineteenth century the works of rational Jewish philosophy have increasingly returned to their former prominence and a new creative period has begun. So the debate is not over.

Finally, the very fact that works of kabbala (and later, *hasidut*) never ceased to attack the legitimacy of rationalistic ways of interpreting the Torah is in itself a testimony to the fact that they were never successful in uprooting them. A position which claims absolute legitimacy for itself has no need to defend itself unless other views continue to compete with it.

But even if kabbala was accepted by most Torah scholars as the true, deeper meaning of the Torah to the exclusion of rational philosophy, why should this keep us from learning from the latter? It is true that halakhic practice is fixed by majority rule. Decisions must be made so that the Jewish people won't end up with “many Torahs.” But the assertion that we make final rulings about larger ideas, about matters of philosophy or ideology, is in itself very doubtful. Whether or not we should ever say that one *hashkafa* is the “right” one because the “majority” has “accepted” it is in itself a highly problematic assertion of *hashkafa* raising its own questions. Such assertions were never an accepted part of Judaism.<sup>64</sup>

62. From the introduction to his edition of *Moreh ha-Nevukhim* according to the Ibn Tibbon translation (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kuk, republished 1981), pp. 14–15.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

64. The prohibition against disobeying legal authority applies only to the Great Sanhedrin. Even according to those who say it applies to authorities in later generations, this only applies to *legal* rulings of halakha, not to philosophy or *hashkafa*. In fact, the entire talmudic tractate *Horayot* is based on the idea that the halakha only forbids one to *act* against a *legal* ruling of the Great Sanhedrin. But there is nothing wrong with differing with them on extra-halakhic issues.

For a full discussion of rabbinic authority showing that it does not provide for

In short, there is no compelling reason to adopt kabbalistic views on prayer just because they claim exclusive legitimacy for themselves. The reason I have dealt at such length with the legitimacy of competing views on the "true" meaning of the Torah, kabbalistic and otherwise, is because each has important conceptual and practical implications for how we should pray, implications that are often mutually exclusive. This is especially so in the case of kabbala; although it is esoteric to most Jews, the kabbala has major implications for prayer by "simple" Jews as well, even those who do not study any kabbala whatsoever. (As we shall see, these implications have to do with the need for prescribed prayer-texts and the legitimacy of petitioning God for personal needs.) The claim of exclusive legitimacy that is so often made for the kabbala as the Torah's "deeper" meaning has forced many Jews to accept its implications for prayer in their totality. But that will not be my approach in this book. We will treat kabbalistic prayer and its offshoots as valid approaches with deep meaning. We will place particular stress on its implications for religious Jews who are *not* kabbalists or hasidim. But we will not consider mystical prayer and its claims any more or less binding than other approaches to the idea of prayer.

### SOME REMARKS ON KABBALISTIC PRAYER

Let us first paint a general picture of what happened to prayer in kabbalistic thought. As we mentioned above, the kabbala mostly deals with prayer in its details, ascribing a "higher" meaning to each and every one of those details. In this way, it avoided the extreme implications of rational philosophy for prayer, implications which denied the entire institution of prayer any "essential" value of its own, much less to its details. Prayer might even be abandoned or replaced by something else in the rational view, because it only served the secondary purpose of "self-training." The prayer-text, according to some rationalists (like Bahya) is only a necessity because people need it as a guide. But this might lead to the conclusion that when the guide is outgrown, the traditional prayer-text may be dropped. Or even worse, that prayer itself should be entirely replaced by silent contemplation.

The kabbala decisively rejected all of these antinomian possibilities. It gave every prayer (in later versions, every *letter* of every prayer!) an "essential" meaning and a higher purpose than just "self-training." Every detail became significant. But the "higher" meaning the kabbala found in the prayers was based on certain assumptions about God, about how He relates to our universe and to ourselves. The kabbala claims to have intimate knowledge—if not about God Himself—then about the complicated ways in which He relates to our finite reality. Standing between us

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"rulings" on larger non-halakhic issues, see Lawrence Kaplan, "Daas Torah," in *Rabbinic Authority and Personal Autonomy* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1992), pp. 1–60.

and the infinite God are “universes,” each containing a detailed system of “*sefirot*,” which the kabbala describes. The *sefirot* are aspects of the Divine which relate to one another in complicated ways. In prayer, of course, we relate to God, and the kabbala reinterpreted this relationship in radical new ways according to the *sefirot*. Obviously, only after accepting the reality of the sefirotic universe in all of its details can kabbalistic prayer make any sense.

The following survey will present no new ideas to people who are already familiar with the kabbala’s basic notions and with kabbalistic prayer. Such people will probably also feel that it misses too much for its brevity. But they may easily skim it or skip it. The survey, brief as it is, has two very limited purposes: (1) To provide readers who are unfamiliar with the basic notions of prayer in the kabbala with just enough information to make intelligent comparisons between kabbalistic prayer and other ideas of prayer; (2) To point out the practical implications of kabbalistic and hasidic prayer for Jews who are *not* kabbalists and hasidim. Even though kabbala was usually the province of a select group of elite scholars, some serious claims were still made based upon it about how other Jews should pray, even if they are not experts on kabbala. We will need to analyze these claims, but we cannot do so unless readers have at least minimal knowledge of the assumptions lying behind them. That is the purpose of this short survey, which makes no claim to saying anything new. It is based on my reading of secondary works on kabbala, supplemented by occasional forays into its primary literature. Though I am far from an expert on the subject, I hope those who know more will find that the presentation here is intelligent and basically correct. For those who would like to explore the ideas presented here on their own instead of relying on my inexperienced presentation, references are provided.<sup>65</sup>

The first kabbalistic system which remains influential today is that of the Zohar. (Our brief look at the idea of prayer in the Zohar will draw on the work of a renowned expert on the topic, Isaiah Tishby.<sup>66</sup>) The Zohar viewed the purpose—not just of prayer, but of all the mitzvot—to be the influences they have on the sefirotic realm. But to have full impact on the sefirot, prayer and other mitzvot had to be accompanied by *kavvanot*. Notice: not *kavvana* (intention) but *kavvanot* (intentions, in the plural). The plural indicates that the many different action-mitzvot and prayers have each have their own specific purposes in the sefirotic universe, which a *mekubbal* (mystic) must concentrate on as he does the mitzva or says the words of the prayer. Thus, there are numerous *kavvanot*, each with its own nuances. A mitzva or prayer done without the correct *kavvanot* in mind has

65. The discussion is drawn from Isaiah Tishby, *Mishnat ha-Zohar*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1982), 184–185, 247–343; Rosenberg (*ibid.*); Ephraim Gottlieb, “Mashmautah shel ha-Tefilla be-Kabbala ha-Sepharadit,” in Cohn, pp. 168–189; and Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer* (Washington: Littman Library, reprinted 1993).

66. See previous note.

relatively little value according to some passages in the Zohar, while others imply that it has none at all.<sup>67</sup>

The emphasis here is on intention, the specific way a *mekubbal* intends to influence the *sefirot* through his action. This means that physical action is seen as an inferior way to serve God, while meditation has the most value. Prayer is entirely meditative and non-physical (besides the fact that the pray-er moves his lips); since it is the least corporeal mitzva with the greatest potential for meditation, the Zohar viewed it as the primary service of God. Thus, the rabbinic term *avoda sheba-lev* (service of the heart as opposed to the body) is a tribute to prayer meaning that prayer is perhaps the highest *avoda* of all. Only "perhaps," because it has one serious competitor: the Temple sacrifices of the past. In the *kavvanot*, prayer and sacrifice had parallel effects on the *sefirot*, so some passages consider them equal. Yet others consider prayer to be superior to sacrifice because the former is non-physical. Nevertheless, all agree that prayer is far superior to all of the rest of the physical mitzvot, despite the fact that those must still be done, with their attendant *kavvanot*, according to law.<sup>68</sup>

Prayer has another great advantage over other mitzvot. Physical mitzvot are a way to "serve" God, *avoda*, because they assist the *sefirot* when accompanied by the right *kavvanot*. But when a person prays he is not just a "servant" of God (*eved*) he is also a "son" (*ben*). These two terms, borrowed from the social analogy of simple prayer, take on a new meaning in the Zohar. The *eved* "serves" God by doing a *tikkun* (literally: "fixing") for the *sefirot*, assisting to bring them into harmony. We will return to this service of the *sefirot* momentarily. But the other aspect of prayer, absent in other mitzvot, is when the soul (or its particular *kavvana*) makes an arduous and dangerous journey through the universe of the *sefirot*, back to its origins. In simpler terms, through prayer a person is reunited with his Father; he attaches himself to God.<sup>69</sup>

These two elements can easily be complementary, as one important passage in the Zohar points out.<sup>70</sup> Together, they make prayer unique among all of the mitzvot. But some *mekubbalim* found them to be in competition, and insisted on emphasizing one over the other. It has been suggested that streams of thought within the kabbala may sometimes be distinguished by which of these two elements it sees as most important in prayer.<sup>71</sup>

67. Tishby, pp. 259–60.

68. Ibid., pp. 210–215, 257.

69. These two themes are discussed at length in the articles by Rosenberg and Gottlieb. Rosenberg called the prayer of the *eved* who does the *tikkun* in the higher worlds "theurgic prayer" (pp. 90–94) and the prayer of the *ben* "mystical prayer" (pp. 96–97).

70. Zohar, vol. 3, 111b–112b, translated in Tishby, p. 360. Reprinted in Rosenberg, pp. 94–96.

71. Rosenberg suggests this (pp. 98–99). Competition between the two views, and the insistence of various authorities on emphasizing one over the other, is the main topic of Gottlieb's article.

Let us return to the idea of *tikkun* now. How does the *mekubbal* "serve" God when he prays, and how does he "fix" the *sefirot*? The answer will be surprising, maybe even shocking, to some readers who are as yet unfamiliar with it. The idea of *tikkun* is based on the fact that the Jewish people and God are depicted as a bride and her groom by the biblical prophets and in rabbinic literature. God's love for Israel is compared to how a man loves a woman. This beautiful analogy is well-known and easy to understand. But in the kabbala, the "man" and "woman" each become aspects of the sefirotic universe. The bride, the feminine aspect, symbolizes the physical people of Israel below, and her fate parallels their fate. This *sefira*, lowest rung on the sefirotic ladder, is called the *Shekhina*, but another name for her (all of the *sefirot* are called by many names, depending on the particular analogy) is *Keneset Yisrael*, the congregation of Israel. The two names are really one, because *shokhen* means "to dwell" in the Bible, specifically God's "dwelling" among Israel in this world. The *Shekhina* is thus the aspect of the Divine relating to Israel in our own physical reality. Thus, it is also the lowest. This lowest *sefira* not only represents the physical people of Israel, but her fate and our fate are intertwined, as we said.

The nine upper *sefirot* represent the limbs of the male body. When all is harmonious, they unite with the *Shekhina* as a man unites with a woman. This anthropomorphic arrangement is applied in full: the lowest of the nine, *Yesod*, corresponds to the male sexual organ. But the problem is that all is *not* harmonious. The physical community of Israel is in exile; God has cast them out of His home. This wordly fact parallels a much deeper evil, discord between the masculine and feminine aspects of the *sefirot* in the higher World. The *Shekhina* has been cast away, her husband has "exiled" her. This is how the kabbala understands the rabbinic idea that when the Jews were exiled, God's *Shekhina* went into exile with them. When we are exiled, she is exiled as well.

So what does prayer accomplish? When the *mekubbal* prays, he visualizes a *tikkun*, a remedy for the Upper Universe to replace estrangement with love. Each prayer is one aspect of the Divine reconciliation. Early in the prayers, well before the *Amida*, he visualizes the *Shekhina* being adorned and beautified (this corresponds to the praises and songs). In the blessing just before the *Amida*, she is escorted to the *huppa* (bridal canopy) by her maids. At the blessing "*ga'al yisrael*" just before the *Amida*, all must rise in honor of the High King, into whose Presence she is led. The first three blessings of the *Amida* represent the male's arms and body embracing his bride and kissing her. The last three blessings represent the lower parts of the body, and it is then that the sexual union between the male and female aspects of the *sefirot*, the *yihud* ("Unification") takes place. It is no accident, then, that petitions are in the *middle* of the *Amida*. This is the "time of desire" when the partners yearn for each other, and requests are granted. The *Shekhina* receives her *shefa* in the consummation of the sexual act, and she is thus raised from her degradation, reunited with her lover in love. (The *shefa* is also compared to flowing waters from a spring.) The *shefa* received by the *Shekhina* reaches our physical world too, through her. Thus, when there is harmony and love in the Upper Worlds, blessing comes to our

physical world as well. When the *Shekhina* is estranged from her lover and they do not unite, blessing ceases. The *tikkun*, the "service" of the *mekubbal*, is to assist the Divine lovers to unite through his visualization during prayer, his *kavvanot*.

There are other versions of how the Divine Unification relates to the *Amida*, but the overall theme is always the same. Sometimes the Zohar gives individual *kavvanot* to words of the *Amida*, but usually the *kavvanot* are for general prayers, not specific words. The most detail of all is reserved for the *Shema*, during which the *yihud* is concentrated in just two sentences: The first sentence, *Shema*, arouses the groom and the second, *Barukh Shem*, arouses his bride. For *Shema*, there are individual *kavvanot* even for specific letters.

We mentioned that the *tikkun* brings blessing to our physical world as well, through the *yihud* it accomplishes. Does that mean a *mekubbal* uses prayer as a tool to serve his own worldly needs? In the Zohar, there seems to be no contradiction between the wish to achieve blessing Above or Below. The two are not only parallel but essentially, human needs are *the same* as Divine needs. Whatever we lack is not really for physical reasons, but because the *Shekhina* is lacking; the needs of both are perfectly legitimate. As Isaiah Tishby concludes, "In the Zohar the needs of the Divinity and the Worlds, the needs of the collective and the individual, the needs of the soul and the body to receive *shefa* from the high and hidden Source—are united, because all areas of existence are united in it through the secret of the all-encompassing Unification."<sup>72</sup>

The "needs of the collective," which we just mentioned, are also important in the kabbala.<sup>73</sup> The Zohar put great emphasis on *tefilla be-tzibbur*, community prayer. First, the number ten required for a minyan had almost too easy a correspondence with the ten *sefirot*! Next, the fact that the *Shekhina* represents the entire nation collectively, as her name implies, means that our combined fate is bound up with hers. Though he lived centuries after the Zohar's appearance, the Vilna Gaon continued this very same theme by urging Jews to pray for the nation instead of the individual, so that the "Upper Congregation of Israel" (the *Shekhina*) will be complete.<sup>74</sup> Other interpretations of community prayer in the Zohar included the analogy of individual prayer to a single flower, and community prayer to a colorful bouquet! This beautiful image, and the other reasons for community prayer we gave here, are just a few expressions of community prayer in the kabbala.

It might seem that contemplative prayer, where a person has to concentrate on the complicated ways the words he says relate to the Divine

72. Tishby, p. 268; the same idea is found on pp. 255, 266–267.

73. Ibid., pp. 270–271.

74. Cited in Mordecai Greenberg, *Ahavat Yisrael* (Kerem be-Yavneh, 1995), p. 21. Other kabbalistic and hasidic sources about praying for the collective, and accepting the mitzva of "love your neighbor as yourself" in prayer, are also cited there, pp. 21–22.

Unification, would be better practiced alone than in the synagogue. But this is just another example of how Jewish mysticism is almost always extremely conservative in practice, if not in theory. Every halakha is given a mystical meaning relevant to the *sefirot*. So far from rejecting halakhic Judaism, kabbala sanctifies its every detail. Another excellent example of this is the halakha not to pray out loud, but nevertheless to mouth the words. There are at least three kabbalistic reasons for this, one of them the fear that loud prayer could disturb the Unification.<sup>75</sup>

Let us now return to our general discussion of prayer in Jewish thought, and to the questions and paradoxes we raised about prayer. It would not be entirely correct to say that the kabbala confronted and answered the philosophical paradoxes directly. Instead, it would be more accurate to claim that kabbala "bypassed" these questions rather than confronting them. This is because in view of the kabbala's assumptions about the nature of the sefirotic universe, those questions simply became irrelevant. One need not ask why God needs our prayers, or how they influence Him, because all these questions are answered implicitly by the *tikkun*. God *does* benefit from the *tikkun*, so it may be called "service." The *tikkun* does have a real impact in our physical world, so we need not ask how prayer can "influence" God. Of course, the "God" being spoken of here is not the immovable God of rational metaphysics, but the emanations of God called the *sefirot*.<sup>76</sup>

Furthermore, unlike rational prayer, kabbala gives not just a general reason to pray despite the paradoxes, but a complete and thorough reason to say every single prayer and perform every one of the mitzvot according to halakha. All of the details are somehow related to the *tikkun*, and serve to bring the *Shekhina* back to her husband in love and harmony. So none of them may be dispensed with.

As we said earlier, and as we emphasized again just now, the true meaning of kabbalistic prayer is mostly in its details. However true this was for prayer in the Zohar, it was taken to further extremes in the kabbalistic system of Rabbi Isaac Luria (known as the "Ari"). The Ari was probably the greatest single figure in Jewish mysticism, who revealed a new scheme for understanding the sefirotic universes. Even a general description of Lurianic prayer is beyond the scope of this chapter and this book.<sup>77</sup> Except for one

75. Tishby, pp. 271–272.

76. As might be expected, this led to a backlash from traditionalists who saw praying to the *sefirot* as unorthodox. One such response is translated in J. David Bleich, *With Perfect Faith: The Foundations of Jewish Belief* (New York: Ktav, 1983). Also see the responsum *Noda Bihuda* on saying "*Le-shem Yihud*" in the prayers (*Yoreh De'ah* 93); and "The Polemic on the Recital of *Le-Shem Yihud*" in Jacobs, *ibid.*, pp. 140–153.

77. For a good introduction, see David R. Blumenthal, *Understanding Jewish Mysticism: A Source Reader* (New York: Ktav, 1978), pp. 169–180. (Also see Jacobs, p. 74, for some comments on it, and how hasidic prayer relates to it.)

Best of all, for an explanation of prayer's function and importance aimed at a popular audience but drawing from a Lurianic outlook on the universe, see *Derekh Hashem* of Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1981), part 4,

point, it would also be irrelevant, because our purpose is to present the minimum background necessary to understand the impact of kabbalistic prayer on those who are *not* kabbalists. The single point needing to be made about Lurianic prayer is summed up in the word "detail." Prayer in the Zohar involved special *kavvanot* relating to the Unification for each prayer, only occasionally interpreting the specific words of a prayer, and rarely its individual letters. But for Rabbi Isaac Luria the *kavvanot* are extremely precise, for every word and letter of the prayers from beginning to end. Using numeric and other hints, the pray-er must keep in mind what every single letter means for the *sefirot* when a word leaves his mouth. Obviously, this could only be accomplished by special, rare individuals with extraordinary memories and gifts of concentration.

Thus, in Lurianic kabbala, "true" prayer became more of an elitist activity than ever before. In general, the people who practiced *kavvanot* while they prayed still prayed alongside simple Jews in the synagogue. But the *kavvanot* must certainly have forced them to take longer, and the advantages of praying together with like-minded mystics could not be totally ignored. This led to the formation of special "prayer-houses" for "those with intent";<sup>78</sup> one such prayer-house, founded by the Yemenite kabbalist Rabbi Shalom Sharabi, still functions today in Jerusalem.<sup>79</sup>

In all, Lurianic prayer was for a limited group of people with special abilities. But eventually, as we shall see, this vision of prayer had a serious impact on the prayers of the masses as well. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, both the hasidim and their opponents drew on the basic assumptions of Lurianic prayer, and found areas of relevance to all Jews. But before we turn to that topic, let us address one last problem with mystical prayer that may have bothered some readers.

Many of the ideas we mentioned about the "Upper" world being parallel to our world, about disharmony or harmony among aspects of God Himself, of "Unification" and *tikkun*, of *sefirot* and how human actions impact on them—all of this may seem not only be strange to many readers, but may make no sense at all. The anthropomorphic sexual imagery of the kabbala may be disquieting, not just to people who are first learning of it, but even to those who are more familiar with it. And it is not just the shock which is problematic, but a general lack of affinity that many people (including myself) often feel towards kabbalistic ideas. Even if we accept the imagery of the *tikkun*, do we really have any idea what it means to visualize it, to "see" the *sefirot*, their interrelationships, and their mythic actions? What does it mean to "have intention" about one or more *sefirot*, to

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chapters 4–6. *Derekh Hashem* succeeds in describing a kabbalistic world without much kabbalistic terminology, and is highly readable.

78. On privacy versus public prayer in Lurianic kabbala (and the consequences this had for later *hasidut*), see especially J. G. Weiss, "The Kavvanoth of Prayer in Early Hasidism," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 9 (1969): 165–167. Also see Jacobs, pp. 40–41, on the famous *klaus* of Brody.

79. Rav Kuk described this special place in *Iggerot Harav Kuk*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kuk, 1980), pp. 68–70 (no. 414).



"arouse" them to do something? Even if a person understands every word in a passage of the Zohar, he still may often feel that it is meaningless. Kabbala is hard to understand and relate to, but in a different way and for different reasons than other bodies of knowledge. I know this from personal experience.

There is a good reason for this. To put it simply, kabbala is subjective knowledge, and it is experiential. Kabbala is not something one learns from a book, even the Zohar, but something that one sees and feels, lives and experiences. Even for people who succeed in mastering kabbala, each experiences it in an individual way, so it is "true" differently for each person. Furthermore, some people are more receptive to this kind of subjective, experiential knowledge, and some are less so. To some it can never mean anything at all, not because they are stupid, but because they are better geared towards other kinds of learning and experience. Not only is kabbala "true" differently for every person, but furthermore it is not equally "true" for every person. Some people just don't respond to it.

For years I read kabbalistic and hasidic texts, and while I usually understood every word I still felt that the texts were not "speaking" to me, that I was somehow missing the point. It was only when I read the books of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the rebbe of Piaseczno (1889–1943), that I found the problem addressed directly, and I began to understand why. This great hasidic rebbe—who was murdered by the Nazis—became best known as the rebbe of the Warsaw ghetto. The holy martyr left us writings of inestimable value, from which I personally have benefitted greatly. His books are all excellent as introductions to hasidut, and to the hasidic understanding of kabbala. The following is from Reb Kalonymus's explanation of how kabbala is a unique form of knowledge:

The unique preparation required to understand these matters does not merely stem from the fact that they are completely sacred. Rather, the kind of understanding necessary to comprehend spiritual matters differs in its very nature from the kind of understanding necessary to know mathematics, for example, or astronomy. In astronomy, say, you contemplate things that are outside of yourself. Even after you know all about the stars, the stars remain outside you, in the heavens. They don't enter your brain. This is why it is possible to think about matters that do not exist at all, as one does in mathematics—for the science of mathematics is almost completely founded on abstract speculation. But holy understanding is the comprehension of that which is within; it is the actual drawing of the light of all the parts of one's soul into oneself. Through this process, each part is revealed within, in accordance with the physical vessel through which it has become manifest.<sup>80</sup>

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80. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, *A Student's Obligation*, trans. Micha Odenheimer (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1995), p. 150.

By the "light of all the parts of one's soul" is meant aspects of the person higher than his physical body and life-force, higher than his intellect, and even higher than his individual soul. Elements of the individual transcend his physical being, and are really parts of the universes of the *sefirot*.<sup>81</sup> These aspects of himself are what a person learns about when he studies kabbala. This means not only that kabbalistic knowledge is internal, different for each person (each "vessel"), but it cannot be grasped by the intellect alone. Intellectual achievements are when the conscious mind, as he said, masters something *outside* of the person. Reb Kalonymus considers intellectual achievement to be "egotistical" for this reason—it pits the mind against something else, something removed from the self. But the kabbala is subjective: whatever a person truly understands of it really a higher part of himself. This part of a person, though subjective, transcends the ego, since the latter is only part of the conscious mind:

When we focus our attention on something, we bring the ego into play. We say to ourselves "I am studying," that is to say the bodily I, the physical I. The holy content is once again transformed into mere human intellect. What we understand, more than the inspiration, is the human content, the garb in which the holy words are clothed. A person can learn Kabbala all of his life and still know only the sequence of the worlds or of the *Sefirot*—that *Chesed* (loving-kindness) precedes *Gevurah* (power, stringency); that *Tiferet* (beauty, harmony) mediates between the two, and so on. The human intellect can comprehend the order and sequence of the *Sefirot*. However, in trying to understand what a particular world or *Sefirah* actually is, a person will naturally use examples taken from this world, which his senses and mind can comprehend. He will then apply this same model to the higher spiritual worlds, and will remain ignorant of the actual reality of these worlds. We might compare this to a blind man who has never seen the sun. He imagines the sun to be round as a ball and hot as an open oven—just more so, better and more beautiful. Can this be called knowledge when, unfortunately, he has no eyes with which to see?

And even though the path of the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples is to draw down very lofty matters into the *Nefesh*, *Ruach*, *Neshamah*, *Chayah*, and *Yechidah* of each individual so that he can comprehend them utilizing the various levels of his soul—if he uses only his intellect in reflecting on these matters, he will understand only the externals, the allegory, but not what it is pointing to. This is not the case when the *Nefesh* and *Ruach* within a person are uplifted and reveal themselves a little. For to the extent that the *Ruach* and *Nefesh* within a person are aroused and revealed, the ego is consequently diminished. One can feel in a non-egotistical way. The arousal of the soul and the spirit and their subsequent revelation allow a person to comprehend, to a limited degree, the inner significance of the holy

81. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

words of our spiritual masters and other spiritual matters. One knows these things in a different way than one knows, for example, the intricacies of an intellectual debate, or things one sees with one's own eyes, or logical proofs. These last are capable of providing knowledge only about the exterior of things, and about the human intellect. Through feeling, and through a kind of knowing that transcends human intellect, one is able to comprehend some of what is beyond human intellect, beneath the garments. One is able to glimpse the radiance of a particular world or a particular *Sefirah*, a little at a time.<sup>82</sup>

In the scholarly literature on kabbala it is commonly said that *hasidut* "psychologized" the kabbala. This is true, and it comes through clearly in Reb Kalonymus's claim that the study of kabbala is really the deeper experience of certain aspects within one's own self. Thus, everything we quoted here describes kabbala as it is viewed through the prism of hasidic teachings. In fact, the first quotation is from an essay entitled "How to Read a Chasidic Text." That being the case, why did I quote here? Wouldn't it have been more appropriate for the next section, on hasidic prayer?

Leaving his details aside, I think that almost any *mekubbal*, from any historical period, would have agreed with Reb Kalonymus that kabbalistic knowledge is essentially experiential, not cognitive. Even in the Lurianic kabbala, with all its intellectual demands for complicated *kavvanot* during prayer, the difficult task of thinking about the *sefirot* would be meaningless without undergoing powerful visions of them at the same time. And these visions would differ for each person who succeeded in having them, thus making kabbala an essentially subjective experience.

This, I think, should be the starting point for anyone to whom the kabbala feels "alien." If some of the things we said in this section on kabbalistic prayer (or other kabbalistic ideas you have read elsewhere) seem to be speaking a foreign language (though most of the words seem familiar), then this may be the reason why. Kabbala is an experience, and it is not a suitable experience for everyone. Different people are receptive to different kinds of learning, so it is understandable that there are many who do not "take" to this kind. But regardless, a person should keep a respectful attitude towards any venerable body of knowledge, especially a kind of knowledge like the kabbala which has had such a great impact on major religious personalities of the past. Remember that all we have done here is to read about kabbalistic prayer, not experience it, and even the reading was necessarily a brief and simplistic presentation.

Everything we said about kabbala in this chapter should be understood in this light. If we have spoken about *tikkun* and *yihud*, about *sefirot* and higher universes, then we have only presented the terms and the dry ideas, not the experience. (And even the "dry ideas" have been presented in a minimal way.) This "outer clothing" of the kabbala can give those of us who are not kabbalists or hasidim some idea of how kabbalistic prayer applies to

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82. Ibid., pp. 159–160.

us, and a good notion of how it differs radically from rational prayer or simple prayer. But we have learned nothing about the true nature of kabbalistic prayer which must be experienced by those who can. Just reading about it has very limited value.

But even those who are not and will not become hasidim or experts on kabbala cannot completely avoid some discussion of kabbalistic prayer. This is because, as we said, the kabbala made certain claims about how *all* Jews should pray, not just a small elite group of mystics. These claims were made most strongly by the early hasidic rebbes and by their opponents, the *mitnaggedim*. Now that we have gained some small understanding of the background of kabbalistic prayer, we will turn to the claims that some later authorities made for all Jews based on its premisses.

### SOME REMARKS ON HASIDIC AND MITNAGGEDIC PRAYER

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there were major debates between the hasidim and *mitnaggedim* of eastern Europe. But it must be made clear at the very outset that the two groups shared almost all the same assumptions about prayer. Both practiced offshoots of Lurianic prayer, and both went the same basic direction in their interpretations of prayer, at least in theory. There are noticeable differences between the way hasidim prayed and non-hasidim prayed, of course, some in theory and even more in practice. But the huge emphasis that has been placed on these differences often makes us lose sight of the fact that the answers to all of the important conceptual questions about prayer and its purpose are similar (if not identical) for both hasidim and *mitnaggedim*, though they disagree on some important details.

So why is hasidic prayer viewed as so different than non-hasidic prayer? The biggest single reason was the hasidic adoption of a new version of the prayer-text to the dismay of the *mitnaggedim*, an issue which we will discuss at length in chapter eight on "Prayer as a Fixed Text." There were also many innovative practices, unique to hasidism, that the *mitnaggedim* objected to. Most of these have been described by Louis Jacobs in *Hasidic Prayer*, a highly readable book notable for its accuracy, thoroughness, and nonpartisanship as it describes the major elements of hasidic prayer. Jacobs has chapters on the hasidic tendency to separate from the larger community and pray in their own groups, the hasidic practice of wearing a girdle during prayer, the early hasidic practice to avoid wearing garments of wool, and the major hasidic emphasis on preparing the psyche for prayer, sometimes for hours at a time, which often caused hasidim to miss the halakhic deadlines for prayer "in its time" (to the great consternation of the *mitnaggedim*). The hasidic doctrine that impure ("strange") thoughts could be "elevated" and even contribute to meaningful prayer also raised the ire of the *mitnaggedim*. Some early hasidim performed bizarre physical movements during prayer, which to the *mitnaggedim* were ridiculous at best and disrespectful at worst. Finally the *Tzaddik*, the hasidic rebbe, was thought to be instrumental for prayers to be effective, and the hasidim found basis for

this in the kabbalistic doctrine of the Unification. None of these hasidic ideas and practices was shared by the *mitnaggedim*; most, as we said, were vehemently rejected. Jacobs does an excellent job of both presenting the hasidic doctrines on all of these issues, and giving fair representation to the reactions by their opponents. All these controversies contributed to the general conception that early hasidic prayer was vastly different from the traditional Jewish prayer of the *mitnaggedim*.

Despite all that has been said, I still assert that when it comes to larger issues about prayer, the hasidim and *mitnaggedim* were basically the same. Not only were they the same but, as we shall see, both have the same practical implications for prayer by Jews today. Each made unique and valuable contributions, but both still shared the same assumptions about the nature of Judaism and the purpose of prayer within it. Those assumptions were drawn by both groups from the Lurianic kabbala.

To understand what this means, let us begin where we left off in the last section, with the "elitist" attitude of Lurianic prayer. "True" prayer, meaning prayer with the extremely complicated *kavvanot* discovered by the Ari, could only be accomplished by a select few. But what did this mean for prayer by other Jews? Could their prayer also have a deeper meaning or not?

Though some hasidim and *mitnaggedim* practiced the Lurianic *kavvanot*, the majority did not. So neither group was willing to say that prayer-without-*kavvanot* was worthless; instead, each group substituted another idea in its place. The early hasidim had the most innovative approach; they succeeded in "generalizing" the idea of kabbalistic *kavvana* in a way that made it available to more people who wanted to serve God on a deeper level, even if they were not themselves experts on kabbala. The deeper meaning was *devekut*, attaching oneself to God through prayer; for the Baal Shem Tov (founder of the hasidic movement) and other early hasidic thinkers, this implied rejection of the specific type of *kavvanot* of the Ari, or even of the Zohar. Emotional attachment to God finds it difficult to coexist with concentration on intricate combinations of *kavvanot*. As Jacobs puts it, "How could the worshipper become attached to God and have only God in mind if, at the same time, he was expected to engage in the very severe effort of retracing the details of the Sefirotic map?"<sup>83</sup>

The hasidic substitute for "unifying" the upper world with specific *kavvanot* was to adopt a new, general "unification" which remains the same throughout every prayer. This unification was accomplished through "attachment to the letters." Now "letters" seems to be reminiscent of the Ari's emphasis on *kavvanot* for details, but here there is a major shift. Remember that though the hasidim rejected the Lurianic *kavvanot* in *practice* (perhaps they were meant for earlier generations, who were more capable of following them while they prayed), in theory they still accepted the idea that every letter has a specific function. Each letter still represents a real spiritual force at large in the sefirotic universe. In earlier types of kabbala

83. Jacobs, p. 75.

the letters were filled with power by the *kavvanot*. In early *hasidut* it might be said that the letters are sefirotic forces in and of themselves. The only problem is that they are separated from one another; they must be "united." The *hasid* visualizes the letters when he prays, "uniting" them into words. This *kavvana* can remain the same for any word in any prayer. In this kind of *kavvana*, like in the Ari's *kavvanot*, the plain meaning of the words is ignored. But this *kavvana* is one that can be achieved by a much wider range of people, and also allows one to become attached to God.

The attachment to God (*devekut*) is achieved by "losing oneself" in the unification of the letters. The idea of *bittul ha-yesh*, "self-annihilation," is an important one in *hasidut*. When one forgets about what he is saying, and eventually forgets that he himself exists as a separate entity, and only focuses on the unification of the letters and their united return to their Divine origin—this is when he truly becomes one with God. *Devekut* implies relinquishing the ego. Concentration on the individual letters, besides the Unifications that it accomplishes, also serves to help one forget himself.

Everything we have said until now is about early *hasidut*, meaning the Baal Shem Tov and his students, the first generation or so of the *hasidic* movement. In later times even the "attachment to the letters" was dropped, and *hasidim* were told to pray "simply," concentrating on the plain meaning of the words. But the idea that the individual letters and words affect the sefirotic universe was never dropped, and continues to be central to this day. Ultimately, it is still the spiritual universe that is the true focus of prayer, not the human being who is praying.

Remember that in the Zohar, praying for human needs and the need of the *Shekhina* to be reunited with her lover were one and the same; both were completely legitimate. I do not know whether the same was true of Lurianic kabbala, or whether anyone has ever even researched the question of whether the Ari himself considered human need a legitimate aspect of prayer. But one thing is absolutely clear: The *hasidim* and *mitnaggedim* both developed their ideas almost completely on the basis of Lurianic kabbala, and both rejected prayer for human needs vehemently, even as a complement to praying for the *Shekhina*. There is no ambivalence whatsoever about the rejection: prayer must be *only* for the *Shekhina* and not at all for personal wants. I do not know whether this absolute rejection of personal motivations to pray draws on the teachings of the Ari or not, but the remarkable consistency of the idea—both for *hasidim* and *mitnaggedim*—implies that they both may have gotten the idea from the same source.

Rivka Shatz-Uffenheimer devoted a full chapter to the views of the Maggid of Mezhibezh, Rabbi Dov Ber on prayer.<sup>84</sup> The Maggid was the

84. On the views of the Maggid of Mezhibezh and his students against prayer for personal need, see Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer, "Ha-Tefilla ha-Mitbonenet," in *He-Hasidut ke-Mistika* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1968), pp. 78–95.

Also see Bezalel Naor, "Two Types of Prayer," *Tradition* 25, no. 3 (1991): 26–34. Naor contrasted the views of Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, who wrote that "Prayer

major student of the Baal Shem Tov, and the primary ideologue of early *hasidut*. He was more responsible than any other personality for the popularization of the hasidic prayer-text and hasidic ideas about prayer. He spoke quite often about the question that concerns us, namely can a person pray for his own personal needs, and his answer was a resounding, unequivocal "No!" His views on this were quite consistent, as were the views of his students, though a minority of them softened his views somewhat.<sup>85</sup> In one much-publicized parable, he chides a person who prays for personal needs for "bothering" the king with petty matters and "distracting" Him (!) from matters of true importance, i.e., the needs of the *Shekhina*. What I would like to add to Shatz-Uffenheimer's discussion is that the greatest ideologue among the *mitnaggedim*, namely Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin, promoted exactly the same view with no hesitancy and with equal force.

Rabbi Hayyim (1749–1821) founded the great yeshiva of Volozhin, which eventually became the mother of the vast majority of non-hasidic yeshivot today. He wrote his contribution to Jewish thought, *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*, as a response to hasidism. *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* is still widely studied by yeshiva students, and there is some justice in calling it the ideological "Bible" of the yeshiva world today. It continues to have a major impact, especially in its views on Torah study and prayer.

Of *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*'s four parts, the second is devoted almost exclusively to prayer. Prayer was of crucial importance to Rabbi Hayyim, despite the fact that he opposed hasidim who valued it over Torah study. Theoretically, *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* opposes *hasidut* and "demotes" the importance of prayer (as opposed to Torah study), but that is only in its theory. On a practical level, Rabbi Hayyim *agrees* with the hasidim on the true meaning of prayer and Torah study and, in a large measure, how they should actually be done. The fact that *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* was written as part of a historical debate has served to overshadow the fact that both parties to the debate agreed on almost all of their fundamental assumptions and practices.

Not all of *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* has the feeling of a hasidic work, of course. Much of it does not. But some parts could just as easily have been written by the same hasidic rebbes who were Rabbi Hayyim's opponents in the debate. Here, for instance, is Norman Lamm's summary of "contemplative prayer" in the thought of Rabbi Hayyim:

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in Judaism . . . is bound up with the human needs, wants, drives and urges, which make man suffer" with the mystical quietistic view of Rabbi Yitzhak Dov Schneerson. The latter found a way to champion quietistic prayer *despite* admitting that the basic obligation to pray means to ask for what one needs.

For more on Rabbi Soloveitchik's views, see chapter six.

85. The main student of the Maggid who not only "softened" his views but disregarded them entirely (!) was Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, whose whole fame rested on the informal way he talked to God about the needs of Israel, and the "simple" petitions he wrote in Yiddish that are still recited by many today.

The *function* of prayer, as it has been stated, is to enhance the relatedness of God to man and the worlds. The specific *intentions* that should accompany the act of worship are graded by R. Hayyim hierarchically. At the very bottom of the scale, sufficient to qualify the prayer as valid but certainly not to be recommended as worship in the proper spirit, is the act of articulation itself, even in languages other than Hebrew. The correct manner of worship, however, beyond this minimum, is that which is informed by utter selflessness. True prayer is completely theocentric. Like the *olah*, the burnt offering which was completely consumed by fire upon the altar, and no part of which was used for human purposes, prayer should be devoted wholly to God. Those parts of the liturgy which are apparently personal petitions are completely reinterpreted so that they are purged of any consideration for the self. This is done by employing the notion that every human need or pain produces a corresponding divine anguish, and what superficially seems to be a prayer for the fulfilment of one's own need or relief of one's pain is, in fact, a prayer for the mitigation of this divine suffering. When one experiences this human sympathy for God to the point of being oblivious to his own privations, his sins are pardoned. In these times (i.e., R. Hayyim's) of economic hardship, when one tends to become engrossed in his own wants and difficulties, it is all the more important to emphasize the theocentric nature of prayer.

If this paragraph were taken out of context, and R. Hayyim's name removed, it could easily be mistaken for a description of the Maggid of Mezhiresh's ideas on prayer, or those of a student of his. It could have been included in Schatz-Uffenheimer's collection of sources for its content, except that Rabbi Hayyim was outside her field of inquiry (early *hasidut*). Not only that, but Rabbi Hayyim continues by describing how at the next level, the soul takes leave of the body and journeys towards its elevated Source (in the sefirotic universe). Finally, the ultimate, highest prayer is exactly the same as in *hasidut*: utter self-annihilation, loss of ego. Rav Hayyim is more sceptical than the hasidim about the possibility of reaching this goal today, but in principle his prayer shares the same purposes as hasidic prayer.

But for our purposes, the quietistic element in Rabbi Hayyim's type of prayer is most important. "Quietistic" means the worshipper "quiets" his own needs and only concentrates on the spiritual meaning of prayer. He only thinks of the *Shekhina*. Beyond this, it means that he "quiets" his individual personality, his ego, and loses himself completely in God. Schatz-Uffenheimer, as we said, devoted an entire chapter to the career of quietistic prayer among the Maggid and his disciples. But after reading her description of quietistic prayer in *hasidut* it is clear that Rabbi Hayyim's type of prayer—both its flavor and content—fits her characterization completely, despite its non-hasidic origins. As we said, when it comes to the most important ideas about prayer, the hasidim and *mitnaggedim* totally agreed.



Similarly, when it came to the metaphysical importance of reciting the exact prayer text, Rabbi Hayyim and the hasidim were in complete agreement. They disagreed on a major detail, of course: *which* prayer text should be chosen. But the idea that prayer involves reciting exactly predetermined words from a specifically chosen text was something extremely important they held in common. This similarity goes even deeper: the hasidim held that reciting the exact words has value for the sefirotic universe even *without* the Lurianic *kavvanot*, so they substituted “attachment to the letters” for the Ari’s detailed kind of concentration. In later times, they reverted to the “plain” meaning of the words entirely. Rabbi Hayyim said almost the same thing, the one difference being that he skipped the middle step. He simply wrote that the words have kabbalistic effects by themselves even without *kavvanot*, so the pray-er might as well keep just their plain, simple meaning in mind. In fact, not concentrating on the *kavvanot* may even be superior to following them, because the *kavvanot* discovered by the Ari, while they are true, are only a tiny fraction of the *kavvanot* intended by the original authors of the prayers. Better to visualize the words themselves, not the Ari’s specific *kavvanot*, and to let them perform *all* of the spiritual effects inherent in them.

At first glance, there may seem to be a contradiction between the advice to concentrate on the plain meaning of the words, and the outright prohibition on asking for worldly needs. After all, the words of the prayers ask for human needs! The idea is, however, to realize that all human needs serve to tell us that the *Shekhina* is in need herself. If I hurt, then She is hurting. It is only for Her that we really pray, even if the words seem to indicate otherwise. Unlike the Zohar, which had the pray-er seek *shefa* to bring joy to both the Upper World and the Lower World at once, for the Maggid and for Rabbi Hayyim the upper world must be our *only* concern. Rabbi Hayyim, as we read, urged suffering, poverty-stricken Jews to make an extra effort *not* to think of their own needs when they pray. In short, while human suffering clues us in that something is wrong Above, the object of our prayers must not be to relieve such suffering. Exactly the same “quietistic” point is made for prayer by hasidism and in the most important ideological tract by a *mitnagged*.

Rabbi Hayyim urged his readers to think of the “plain” *kavvana* of the words, and as we said, later hasidic leaders urged their followers to do the same. The term often used for this is *perush ha-millim*, “the meaning of the words.” The term is borrowed from the standard halakhic literature, but it is still somewhat ambiguous. At first glance, it could mean:

- (1) To *think* the literal meaning of the words (perhaps by translating them into one’s native tongue as he says them), or ;
- (2) To *mean* the words in their plain sense.

When the *Tur* said that one should think of “the meaning of the words” it added that they should be said with the attitude of “a poor man who stands in the doorway (begging),” as we saw in chapter one. This proves that for the *Tur*, at least, even “simple” *kavvana* was not an exercise in

translating basic Hebrew words, but in humbly *meaning* the words one says to God. Any non-mystical view of prayer could accept this as an adequate definition of *kavvana*.

It could also be argued, however, that "the meaning of the words" really means the first option: to *think* what they mean. I suspect that many of the rational approaches to prayer we discussed earlier in this chapter, which find value prayer's value in what it teaches man, might view "the meaning of the words" in this way. Thus, *kavvana* becomes an intellectual exercise. It may even involve thinking about interpretations of the words beyond their plain translation. Some of the rational approaches to prayer in modern times, which we will survey in the next chapter, are explicit about this. But this rather dry sort of *kavvana*, this "meaning of the words," cannot convey the depth of feeling and sincerity idealized in biblical and rabbinic prayer, as we saw in the last chapter.

When hasidic and *mitnaggedic* leaders advocated praying according to "simple *kavvana*," and "the meaning of the words," they added a third approach to the above two: not to mean or think the plain meaning because that is the essence of *kavvana*, but to "intend" it *instead of* the Lurianic *kavvanot*. When Rabbi Hayyim, for instance, says that one should think of the plain meaning of the words, he does not mean that one should petition God like he would petition a king, as those words imply. That would ruin the quietistic imperative. Rather, what he means is that one should think of the normal dictionary definition of the words *instead of* the meanings they hold as a kabbalistic code. This is because they accomplish their kabbalistic function even without kabbalistic understanding. But even this "plain" non-kabbalistic relation to the words is really not so plain at all. Whenever they express human needs, he must put his own troubles aside, exclusively feeling the needs of the *Shekhina* and Her pain.

So the third definition of "the meaning of the words" is not really what it sounds like. When more recent halakhic works stress that one should say the words carefully and think of "the meaning of the words," this approach is usually their influence. It is not the simple approach to prayer that they are stressing, but a kabbalistic approach to prayer that has shed the Lurianic *kavvanot* in practice (in theory, the words still have special powers).

We began by saying that mystical prayer, as interpreted by hasidim and *mitnaggedim*, makes real claims about how all Jews should pray (even those who are not kabbalists). The above quietistic demand is the first claim. The demand *not* to pray for personal needs was aimed at all Jews, not just an elite group of scholars. If accepted, it would certainly have profound implications for the meaning of prayer. It might also make prayer far less attractive to many Jews.

The next demand made by the same groups is something we have already mentioned, but needs to be fleshed out for its relevance to become fully clear. I am referring to the idealization of a predetermined fixed text for prayer, where every letter has a specific meaning so no detail may ever be changed. The practical upshot of this is that every Jew, regardless of how educated he is (as long as he knows the Hebrew alphabet), must always say every word of the prayers in Hebrew whenever he can, from beginning to

end. He may not skip a single prayer, nor may he substitute a translation for any of them. When I say “must” I do not mean a halakhic prohibition, because even the hasidic and *mitnaggedic* proponents of this type of prayer were fully aware that prayer in other languages is permitted by the *Shulhan Arukh*, and that many texts recited from the siddur are customs rather than rabbinic obligations. However, concern for the profound kabbalistic effects of every Hebrew word was enough for the statement to be made that under normal circumstances no part of the siddur may be skipped, and that prayer in Hebrew without *kavvana* is preferred to prayer in translation with *kavvana*.<sup>86</sup>

I think it is fair to assume that throughout history, the attitude of the masses towards prayer was that of the “simple” prayer we presented in chapter four. *Kavvana* meant sincerity, really meaning what one said to God. Some Jews may have had more sincerity while others just mouthed the words, but when pressed most people would say that prayer meant talking to God, praising Him, and asking Him for what we need. Many scholars, not just simple Jews, must have shared this “simple” idea of prayer too.

If we take such simple prayer as the starting point for Jews who are not kabbalists, then the consequences of hasidic/*mitnaggedic* prayer for most Jews are, in my opinion, devastating. The first consequence is a practical one: Let us say that someone decides he wants to pray “simply,” but with *kavvana*. So he resolves to say just some of the prayers at a slow, careful pace instead of rushing through all of them. The idea of “simple” prayer would find no problem with a person skipping the passages on sacrifices at the beginning of *Shaharit* or much of the praise in *pesukei de-zimra* (preliminary verses of song) because he honestly cannot concentrate for so long. It is better to say less and mean it. Halakhically, this is perfectly fine. But from the mystical perspective it ruins the entire purpose of prayer!

It is true that most hasidic/*mitnaggedic* sources advise a person to say every word of the prayers slowly and carefully, because each affects the Upper Worlds. This would seem to be a boon, even according to simple prayer. But as a practical matter, it is an objective fact that to say every word of an average daily *Shaharit* carefully and precisely, without rushing, takes at least a full hour. Nowadays, a synagogue where *Shaharit* takes forty-five minutes on a weekday is considered “slow,” and a *Shaharit* of a full hour is extremely rare, even in yeshivot. Things were probably not much different in eastern European synagogues two centuries ago. And even if extremely lengthy daily prayer was considered a necessity by devoted hasidim and *mitnaggedim*—even if they really did take that long—only rare individuals would have the necessary patience (let alone concentration) to pray for so long each day, even if the burdens of life didn’t interfere with setting aside so much time for prayer.

Nevertheless, hasidic/*mitnaggedic* tracts told every Jew, in very strong terms and based on the authority of the kabbala, never to skip anything in

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86. For views on prayer-in-translation, see chapter eight, note 38.

the siddur regularly. If in the past most Jews were kept from skipping parts to say the rest slowly by nothing more than the force of custom, now they were told that doing so could cause terrible results for the sefirotic universe. Doubtless, many Jews may always have had a sort of "obsession" with saying every single word, an obsession that inevitably prevents the "simple" kind of *kavvana*. But the mystical idea of prayer reinforced this attitude in the strongest terms possible, making the devotion to the text much stronger than the halakha actually demands. In reality most Jews could not spend time saying every word carefully without skipping, but forbade skipping kabbalistic notions forbade skipping in the most severe terms. The practical result was that the practice of rushing through every page of the siddur daily was deeply reinforced.

Another ramification of hasidic/*mitnaggedic* prayer has to do with *hid-dush*. In chapter one we saw that Hazal thought personal expression was desirable, even necessary, for meaningful prayer. In chapter eight we will see that in the dominant halakhic view, one may use his own words during prayers and blessings so long as what he said relates to the general theme the blessing speaks of. But all of this is rendered undesirable or impossible by hasidic and *mitnaggedic* prayer. Using one's own words during a blessing instead of reading straight from the siddur clearly defeats the possibility of every letter having a specific affect on the *sefirot*. And when the quietistic denial of one's own needs is combined with the lack of kabbalistic value in words that one says to God but which don't come from the siddur, the result is that personal petitions lose most of their appeal.

The tension between the talmudic appreciation of informal prayer, versus the kabbalistic-hasidic-*mitnaggedic* devaluation of it, is revealed in an oft-quoted explanation of a verse from the Torah by a great twentieth-century hasidic *rebbe*, Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, in his commentary on the Torah called *Meshekh Hokhma*. The comment was inspired by the following words, spoken by Jacob to Joseph: "And now, I assign you one portion more than to your brothers, which I wrested from the Amorites with my sword and bow" (Genesis 48:22). Onkelos (the traditional Aramaic translation) renders the words "with my sword and bow" as *bitzloti uve-va'uti*, which means "with my prayer and with my pleading." According to the Onkelos translation, Jacob is not saying he won his portion through military prowess, but because he prayed and God answered him. But *Meshekh Hokhma* found an even deeper message in the Onkelos translation:

"My prayer" refers to the fixed order of prayer . . . and "my pleading" is [personal] petition, when they said that if a person wants to say something new in his prayer according to the theme of each blessing [he may], or that a person may ask for his needs . . . (see *Avoda Zara* 8a).

The difference between the two is that *kavvana* does not prevent the fixed prayer from being accepted, and if he had *kavvana* during *Avot* it is enough, and with a small amount of *kavvana* it is enough.

This is not so for the "new thing" when a person says something new by asking for his needs. [For this] he needs great *kavvana*. As they

said in the chapter *Tefillat ha-Shahar* (Berakhot 29b): "Rabbi Zeira said, 'I am able to say something new in it, but I worry that I may become confused.'" [Rabbi Zeira's worry] is because the "new thing" must be with such great *kavvana*.

. . . [T]he order of community prayer is accepted even without *kavvana*. . . .

Perhaps this is what David meant in the psalm about Achitophel when he said, "Evening, morning, and noon, I complain and I moan, and He hears my voice" (Psalms 55:18)—[though] I don't pray any more than the obligation "He hears my voice."<sup>87</sup>

*Meshekh Hekhema* recognizes the reality of informal prayer for personal needs because people have always done it (including Jacob himself!) and because the halakha explicitly provides for it. Nevertheless, he writes that it is not nearly as effective as the obligatory prayers in the siddur. The reason is that the words of the fixed prayers have kabbalistic functions that they carry out with or without *kavvana*, while the words of personal petitions have no such effects and lack spiritual value unless a person adds *kavvana* to them. *Meshekh Hekhema* takes pains to de-emphasize the *kavvana* required in the fixed prayers: he does not interpret the fact that *kavvana* is only needed for *Avot* (the first blessing) as a halakhic concession to human frailties, but as a confirmation that an individual's *kavvana* pales in significance to the kabbalistic *kavvana* inherent in the Hebrew words. The fact that *Avot* requires *kavvana* is thus the exception, not the rule, because most fixed prayers do not. Rabbi Zeira's worry is not that he will lose his place if he uses his own words, but that when he uses his own words he will need to have great *kavvana*, and he doesn't know if he will be able to do so! And David says that God automatically hears him when he says the three obligatory prayers, so there is no reason for him to add extra voluntary prayers.

Finally, even though according to his interpretation of Jacob's words, Jacob prayed *both* ways and gave them both pride of place in the verse, *Meshekh Hekhema* makes it clear that the fixed prayers are more important (perhaps this is hinted by Jacob's mentioning it first of the two?). *Meshekh Hekhema* could never actually prohibit informal personal prayer entirely, but the passage was certainly meant to de-emphasize or even discourage it, as the very last point about David's not praying "any more than the obligation" makes clear.

In short, informal prayer becomes unimportant, to change any words of the siddur becomes a travesty, and only the exact words found in the siddur are considered effective in the most important ways. Even personal *kavvana* has far less importance than the act of saying the right words. If *hiddush* is truly important for sincerity in "simple" prayer, and if such sincerity is

87. Some of this passage was omitted in early editions of *Meshekh Hekhema*, and was recovered from the author's own original manuscript.

prayer's only true meaning, then the hasidic/*mitnaggedic* idea of prayer dealt simple prayer a severe blow.

When excessive loyalty to every word in the siddur is combined with the severe quietistic attitude described earlier, namely that all Jews should try *not* to think of their own suffering when they pray, simple prayer suffers a mortal blow. The strict denial of personal need by both the Maggid and Rabbi Hayyim simply cannot be reconciled with prayer as most Jews have always done it. It creates total dissonance between the words a Jew says and what he really means. This may not be wrong, but it means that prayer by most Jews—even those who pray with sincerity—is far from ideal, and that they should change their attitudes completely.

To be sure, some of the Maggid's students softened his opposition to personal need in prayer. Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev was anomalous in that he alone championed talking to God in Yiddish, freely. But the idea of self-denial never completely left hasidic prayer, and the mystic devotion to the text, above and beyond halakhic requirements, succeeded in influencing later halakhic codes.<sup>88</sup>

Worst of all, the very idea that the words have meaning even *without kavvana* is ultimately irreconcilable with the traditional rabbinic and halakhic idea that the *only* value of prayer is *kavvana*. (We explored the traditional rabbinic approach to *kavvana* fully in chapters one and two.) It is possible to harmonize these two positions by saying that the fixed prayers have *some* meaning without *kavvana* and even *more* meaning with it, as many popular books on Jewish prayer do nowadays. But this can only be done by ignoring the objective statements made on both sides and diluting their doctrines. While both the rabbinic opinion making *kavvana* an absolute necessity and the kabbalistic argument that the words have value without it remain influential, the latter idea has undoubtedly succeeded in undermining the former more so than vice versa. It is ironic that kabbala, which began its public career by deepening the idea of *Kavvana* and totally rejecting rote prayer, ultimately led to the idea that the words themselves have supreme value even without any kind of *kavvana* whatsoever, mystical or otherwise.

One more point needs to be made about hasidic prayer, however: a very positive one. From what we have said so far it might seem that hasidic prayer is irreconcilable with simple prayer and innocent sincerity. But this is contrary to the popular image of hasidism as a popular, anti-elitist movement that honored the heartfelt prayers of simple Jews. There are countless hasidic tales of common Jews who prayed to God, and their prayer was considered superior to the prayer of great rabbis. One of the most famous is the story of an ignorant Jew who came to the synagogue but did not know how to read the siddur. All he knew was the Hebrew alphabet, so he recited the alphabet over and over again, asking God to put

88. Consider, for instance, the ruling found in *Mishna Berura* on not shortening *Pesukei de-Zimra* for any other reason than missing *tefilla be-tzibbur*; see chapter twelve, note 12.

the letters in the right order, and God found his prayer precious! There are numerous tales along these same lines, each concluding that the simple sincerity of the hero is much beloved of God. But how does this fit in with the hasidic insistence on deeper *kavvanot*, on contemplation?

Before answering, note the striking similarity between the dichotomy of simple prayer and contemplative prayer in hasidism when compared to another group of mystics who were also known as *hasidim*. I refer to the medieval German rabbis, pietists, and ascetics known as the *Hasidei Ashkenaz*. The *Hasidei Ashkenaz* (whose best-known representative is Rabbi Yehuda he-Hasid) were distinctive in their unusual pietistic practices, especially for the value they placed on asceticism and self-mortification as forms of penance. There is no direct historical connection between these early hasidim and the hasidim of eastern Europe from the eighteenth century on. Nevertheless, the similarity in their attitudes toward simple prayer is striking.

Like later Jewish mystics, the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* interpreted the words of the prayers according to a detailed symbolic mystical system. Praying with these ideas in mind was considered "true" prayer by them. Nevertheless, in the *Sefer Hasidim* attributed to Rabbi Yehuda he-Hasid, simple prayer is also championed. In one story, an ignorant shepherd who didn't know the halakhic prayers asked God, with utter sincerity, if he might watch His flocks for Him.<sup>89</sup> This story (which itself is highly reminiscent of similar stories by the later hasidim of eastern Europe) seems diametrically opposed to the mystical view of prayer by the *Hasidei Ashkenaz*; the answer seems to be that saying the right words with the right intentions is the highest form of prayer for those who are able, but God still accepts informal prayer from the uneducated if it is sincere.<sup>90</sup>

Louis Jacobs, from whose work we drew the above description of hasidic prayer, was also aware of this discrepancy and gave a similar answer:

In view of all that has been said, the opinion, encouraged, unfortunately, by popular works on Hasidism, that the movement hailed the prayers of the unsophisticated offered in simple faith, needs to be drastically revised. It is true that there are Hasidic tales of the Baal Shem Tov and his followers refusing to reject the prayers of the untutored, but such tales are not peculiar to Hasidism and are found even among the Lurianic Kabbalists who certainly favoured . . . highly sophisticated techniques of contemplation in prayer. These tales mean no more than that the leaders of the movement, with their stress on inwardness and concern for the masses, believed that God accepted every true prayer even if it was confused and in error. But this was because nothing higher could have been expected from the heroes of

89. Tishby, p. 251, cites this story, but I have been unable to locate the reference in other editions of *Sefer Hasidim* than the one he refers to.

90. Tishby, pp. 250–252. For more details on the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* and their views on prayer, see the references in chapter eight, note 35.

these tales. The Hasid, if he was capable of it, was expected to rise to much higher realms in his prayers and for him the simple prayer was most emphatically not enough.<sup>91</sup>

Simple prayer was thus not an ideal. Rather, "in all such similar tales it is emphasized that the hero was an ignorant but devout man, one who could do no better."<sup>92</sup> Jacobs's way of solving the discrepancy is true as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. Rather, there is an element in *hasidut* that *idealizes* the feelings of simple prayer, even for a "true" hasid, though Jacobs is correct that these simple feelings are not expected to be the sum total of his prayer-experience.

The element missed by Jacobs, a factor that made hasidism extremely popular to the masses from its very beginnings, is the idea that inspiration is best aroused from below, not from above. In other words, high-level mystical contemplation, however desirable, is the wrong way to *start* praying. The intellect is seldom inspiring. What can awaken true *kavvana* are "mundane" methods, such as singing, dancing, saying the words out loud with great feeling, imagining their "plain" meaning with vivid pictures in the mind, making physical movements during prayer to express being "carried away" by them, and even the use of alcohol! A hasid was encouraged to do these physical acts while he prayed, even when he had no *kavvana*, precisely because they serve to awaken and arouse *kavvana* on higher levels. It is not intellectual appreciation of prayer and its deeper meaning that arouses the soul, not even of the Lurianic *kavvanot*, but feelings that are aroused through physical and "lower" emotional means. Arousing *kavvana* in these ways is an inseparable part of prayer, even of deeper contemplative prayer.

The basic idea has been beautifully described by Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, whom we quoted above. Though Reb Kalonymus is a twentieth century figure, this does not mean that the means to arousing *kavvana* which he describes were not part of early *hasidut* as well. We quote him here not because the idea is originally his, but because of the way he expresses it:

At times, a person may wish to pray with an awakened heart and an aroused soul and yet he finds himself unable; his heart and soul are blocked. He starts to pronounce the words of the prayer out loud, as the holy books suggest, not for the sake of the volume, but as if he were straining to roll away a boulder that has been stopping up the source of his heart and soul. He says the words of the prayer as they were intended when they were written—that is, he doesn't just try to understand what each word means—he tries to mean the words. For example, when he says "Praise God, call on His name," he imagines himself standing opposite the whole world and shouting out to them: "Give praise to

91. Jacobs, p. 34.

92. Ibid., p. 35.



God—are you all asleep? Call out His name!” If he were to simply think this intention in his heart, as he whispered the words, it would not have the same effect. Calling out loudly awakens his *Nefesh*, to an extent, and excites it to pray passionately. Why is the voice more capable of arousing the soul than the intellect? The *Nefesh* and *Ruach* are both spiritually higher and lower than the intellect. They are lower because the *Neshamah*, which is the source of the life of the intellect, is higher than *Nefesh* and *Ruach*. They are higher because they have an ability to reveal the soul that surpasses that of wisdom and mind.<sup>93</sup>

The aspects of a person called *Nefesh* and *Ruach*, his bodily life-force and the emotions of his heart, are not his highest qualities. Yet in some ways they are higher than his intellect (*Neshamah*) because they are easily aroused by outside stimuli, unlike the rational intellect. It is the *Neshamah* that calls forth deeper kabbalistic or hasidic *kavvanot*; but a person must be aroused from his lowest levels to *experience* prayer and not just to *think* it, and only then does the *Neshamah* enter the picture.

According to Reb Kalonymus, *kavvana* for simple prayer is not to *think* the plain idea of the words, but to *mean* it. What does “to mean it” mean? It means to think, feel, and *do* what the words mean in the context of a conversation. We are saying them because we are talking to someone or something. We are not necessarily even talking to God (especially when it comes to prayers of praise.) In order to do this, a person has to know who he is talking to. If the words say, as in Reb Kalonymus’s example, “Praise God! Call upon his name!” then he must, in his mind, envision himself addressing the whole world and demanding it to praise God. In prayers where we do address God directly, the idea is to say them out loud in a tone of voice indicating that we really mean what we are saying. Reb Kalonymus also suggests other “mundane” techniques besides those we have cited here; see reading 8, where the passage is quoted in full.

Everything we read about in this passage, though, concerns simple prayer, not contemplative prayer. Reb Kalonymus is doing nothing more than describing how to inspire *kavvana* as basic human sincerity for what a person says to God, or to others, when he prays.

Reb Kalonymus was certainly in favor of contemplative prayer. He did not see the kind of prayer described above as the ultimate type of prayer. But even the deepest prayer must *start* this way. Simple sincere *kavvana* is the beginning of the path toward contemplative *kavvana*. But Reb Kalonymus is fully aware of the value of all *kavvana*, even the simple kind.

In my opinion, this is why early *hasidut* was so positive regarding the simple *kavvana* of the masses. Not just because simple sincerity has limited value for those who are not capable of praying more deeply, as Jacobs writes, but also because simple awakening of the heart, inspired by physical means, is the only path to contemplative prayer that one experiences deeply, not just thinks about. Simple prayer is valuable in and of itself, even

93. Shapira, pp. 162–163.

if it is ultimately surpassed by those capable of contemplative hasidic prayer. Despite the strong statements against simple prayer by early hasidic leaders, designed to motivate Jews to pray on a deeper level, the value of simple sincerity was also acknowledged by them. Paradoxically, the movement that said the strongest things against simple *kavvana*-as-sincerity also taught us how to motivate just such prayer in the deepest way possible. There is certainly tension between these two attitudes in hasidic literature, but they can form a dialectic instead of a contradiction. If I am correct, then some of the most vehement "quietistic" statements must be thought of as exaggerations for the purposes of rhetoric. The urge to pray "simply," including for one's own needs, may have been seen as so strong that the earliest hasidim could not help but to protest against it. But the objection may truly have been against it being the *end* of prayer for those capable of more, not its being the means to prayer on a deeper level.

In conclusion, hasidic and *mitnaggedic* prayer emphasized two things that are incompatible with simple prayer when taken at face value. The rule that one may pray only for the *Shekhina* and not for one's own needs, combined with the devaluation or total rejection of personal expression in prayer, make simple prayer impossible. However, *hasidut* also made a positive contribution to simple prayer in the opposite direction. The idea that a person can inspire simple sincerity by saying the words *as if* he means them (even if he does not really mean them deeply at the beginning) is an excellent technique for inspiring *kavvana* in simple prayer as well. For hasidim, of course, this is only the first step toward another kind of *kavvana*, but it is also a valuable idea for those who choose to sincerely pray the simple way.

## *Rational Prayer in Modern Times*

### THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Not long after the exile of the Jews from Spain (in 1492), the kabbala began to eclipse rationalism in Jewish thought. Rabbi Yosef Albo's *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, written in the century before the expulsion, is considered by many to be the last of a genre, the final classic of medieval Jewish philosophy. (Though possible exceptions are the works of Rabbi Don Isaac Abravanel, who lived through the expulsion.)<sup>1</sup> But the competition to rational philosophy, namely the kabbala, had already begun expanding its influence centuries before Albo and Abravanel, and by their time it was already widespread; each of them refers to it occasionally. It was only after their time, however, that it became dominant, to the exclusion of rationalist thought.

Supporters of rationalism and kabbala had been debating each other for centuries before the Spanish expulsion, sometimes politely and oftentimes not: supporters of each approach often denied the legitimacy of the other. Shortly after the Jews were expelled from Spain, however, the debate gradually came to an end, with the kabbala achieving close to absolute dominance. This dominance continued virtually unabated for over three hundred years, until well into the nineteenth century.

But events forced a major change during the nineteenth century. The legitimacy of traditional Judaism was increasingly attacked by the Haskala movement in eastern Europe, and by Reform Judaism in western Europe. In response, many Orthodox rabbis were forced to defend traditional Jewish beliefs and practices by justifying them rationally. This caused a new flowering of scholarship, and led to the creation of a new genre of Torah

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1. Abravanel (1437–1508) wrote a massive Bible commentary, philosophic works, and commentaries on other important texts like *Pirkei Avot* and the Passover Haggada. He was also a statesman, Finance Minister to several European kings. In terms of his philosophy, he wrote a commentary to Rambam's *Moreh*, but what truly competes for the title of a classic work is *Rosh Amana*. Nevertheless, *Rosh Amana* never gained the impact or popularity of the other works we surveyed in the last chapter.

literature. For instance, some of the most important commentaries on the Torah in modern times were written in order to relatively prove that the oral interpretations of the Torah by Hazal are its true meaning. Such commentaries include *Ha'amek Davar* by the Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin), *Malbim*, *Ha-Ketav v'ha-Kabbala* by Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenborg, and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's commentary on the Torah. But these rational defenders of Judaism also tackled other areas besides biblical interpretation. Two of them returned to the rationalistic view of prayer found in the classic works of medieval Jewish philosophy in order to show its inherent logic and deepen our sensitivity to it; they added their own insights to earlier ideas, and in the process made significant contributions to our understanding of rational prayer. The two were Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenborg and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. They were contemporaries and fellow countrymen (both were German Jews), but since Mecklenborg was the older of the two we will discuss his views first.

## RATIONAL PRAYER FROM THE TEXT IN *SIDDUR IYYUN TEFILLA*

Mecklenborg published a commentary on the siddur he called *Iyyun Tefilla*,<sup>2</sup> which (if I may be excused for voicing my personal preferences) is perhaps the most beautiful commentary ever written on it. The commentary is clear, readable, persuasive, and meaningful. But our concern is with something beyond style, namely the *philosophy* reflected in the commentary. It is not surprising that the methodology Mecklenborg employed in his commentary is a direct result of basic assumptions that its author made about prayer. He made those assumptions explicit in his Preface.

In the Preface to *Iyyun Tefilla*, Mecklenborg turns to the "man of prayer" and tells him, in flowery poetry, how to perform the "service of the heart" for God. The entire Preface is built upon Mecklenborg's interpretation of the words "service" (*avoda*) and "to pray" (*le-hitpallel*). Regarding the first, he says that *avoda* is a far simpler term than many people have thought. It has been asked (as we asked in previous chapters) how one can "serve" God without physical actions, or why God should have need of anyone's "service." Mecklenborg answered that the question is entirely unnecessary because one who shows that he is subservient to another can be called his servant, even if he doesn't actually "serve" him physically. Therefore, other complicated explanations of how tefilla can "serve" God, including kabbalistic ones, are unnecessary.

The definition of *le-hitpallel* is more complicated, because Mecklenborg cited two different ways to explain the Hebrew verb for "to pray." The way he reconciled the two definitions reveals his underlying assumptions about the nature of prayer.

Both definitions of *le-hitpallel* deal with the fact that the verb takes the

2. Warsaw, 1895. On the phrase *iyyun tefilla*, see chapter one, note 5. Obviously, Mecklenborg meant his title to refer to the "good" meaning of the phrase.

Hebrew reflexive form (*hitpa'el*), which indicates that the verb acts upon its subject. The first definition is no different than the one we used earlier in our discussion of biblical prayer: prayer means to "seek a judgement in one's own favor (from God)," and that is why the verb is reflexive. The pray-er asks God to see the justice of his cause and decide in his favor, against his evil fate. This was how medieval Hebrew grammarians such as Radak defined "tefilla" in the Bible.

But there is a second definition. According to Mecklenborg, the grammatical root of tefilla means "to cast aside" or "to separate," and when intensified it means "to come to a decision" between two opposing views. That is how it takes on the idea of judgement in the first definition. When used in the reflexive, *le-hitpallel* means "to separate within oneself" or "to come to a decision about oneself." This translation of tefilla, combined with Rabbi Yosef Albo's explanation of how prayer works, makes an interesting synthesis possible. Albo wrote that prayer doesn't "influence" God, as we saw earlier. Instead, when a person prays he reaches a new spiritual level, and is not the same "person" anymore. When he prays, it is not he who has "influenced" God to grant him some good, but he himself who has been influenced and changed by the prayer so that he is now ready to receive whatever it is he has asked for.

Albo's idea can be combined beautifully with Mecklenborg's second definition of tefilla. Tefilla means a person must "cast away" the wrong ideas in his soul and "decide" in favor of holy thoughts when he prays with *kavvana*. But by doing so he "influences" himself in a good way and makes himself deserving to receive God's *shefa*, as per Albo. Thus, we now have a definition of the word tefilla matching the rationalistic view of prayer.

But what about the first, older definition? Does it still have any value? Mecklenborg realized that it is the only definition that really makes sense in the context of the words of our prayers:

But in relation to the Creator, to whom man sets forth his supplication and prays to, the word "*mitpallel*" does not take on the reflexive meaning,<sup>3</sup> and there are other examples of this. . . . In this sense the meaning of *mitpallel* is a request for a judgement, namely that God should send his help. . . .<sup>4</sup>

But Mecklenborg did not return to the biblical view of prayer. The above passage continues by saying that the kind of help one asks for from God is to help him in his struggle against the Evil Inclination. Mecklenborg does not mention worldly, physical requests. In the text of the Preface as well, Mecklenborg twice mentioned a person turning to God and asking for His help, but only for help in "deciding" against the evil inclination and casting

3. By "not tak[ing] on the reflexive meaning," Mecklenborg means it can take an object and be said to "act" upon another, namely God.

4. This passage is from his Introduction, p. 4b.

it out. Though contextually prayer is something addressed to God (the first definition), in its deeper meaning it is only really aimed at oneself.

So all of these subtle points about grammar have real ramifications for how one prays. But they also had ramifications for how Mecklenborg wrote his commentary. Thus far, we have seen one of Mecklenborg's assumptions about prayer: his definition of *tefilla* (based on the thought of Rabbi Yosef Albo). But Mecklenborg added a new factor to Albo's definition of prayer as an act of "self-training." Earlier, we saw that Albo was far less concerned with which words one says to God than with the intellectual realization those words express. The only kind of prayers he discussed are original compositions. Albo never even mentioned the standard rabbinic blessings once in his philosophic essay on prayer. He did not idealize them.

But for Mecklenborg, the "essential" value of the rabbinic blessings—of the exact text of the siddur—was a religious reality that could not be doubted. This may be because he was more strongly influenced by kabbalistic ideas about its sanctity than Albo was. Though he accepted Albo's philosophic explanation of prayer, he added a nuance to that explanation by combining it with a view that designated "prayer" as "reciting the text of the siddur." Mecklenborg decided that when it comes to the rabbinic blessings, the intellectual value of prayer that Albo described cannot be fully achieved unless the *mitpallel* understands the implications and nuances of the words he says to God. Like many kabbalists (as we saw in chapter five), Mecklenborg wrote that every word of every blessing must have a special meaning, since the blessings were composed by the Men of the Great Assembly. But unlike kabbalists, Mecklenborg did not focus on each word's mystical significance. Instead, he tried to show how each word has something to contribute to the true "service" of God in prayer, which consists of "deciding" in favor of holy ideas and "casting out" unworthy thoughts and ideas. In other words, the text with its hidden, implied meanings is a guide to religious purification of the mind and the heart. It is up to us to try to discover those meanings, and to make use of them when we actually pray. Mecklenborg accepted Albo's philosophy of prayer as "self-training" and tied in that "self-training" with textual analysis of the siddur.

Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenborg practiced what he preached, and his siddur was the result of a lifelong project. According to his Preface, he collected the new ideas that occurred to him about the deeper meaning of the siddur for a period of forty-two years, and wrote them down as personal notes to refer to when he prayed. It was not the source of an idea that was important to him, not its profundity, but whether it was appropriate to think about during prayer. Those that added to the experience of prayer were the ones he recorded, and these eventually became the commentary *Iyyun Tefilla* when he finally published them.

To better appreciate what Mecklenborg meant, let us look at an example from his commentary. He noticed several anomalies in the first blessing of the *Amida*, and explained them according to his basic assumptions. The passage he examined was this: "Blessed are You . . . Who grants good favors and is the Creator of all, Who remembers the kindnesses of the

Patriarchs and will bring a redeemer to their children's children for the sake of His name, with love." Mecklenborg asked two questions on this passage: What does granting favors have to do with being the Creator? And why do God's "favors" have to be described as "good favors"?

Mecklenborg answered that any creator has a natural love for his creations, as any owner naturally has affection for his hard-earned possessions. Both want to improve their creations or possessions as best they can, and to help them in any way possible. God's attitude toward us is no different, as we are His creations and possessions. Furthermore, it is necessary to describe God's "favors" to us as "good" in contrast to human favors, which diminish the receiver's pride and may cause him to feel inferior to the giver. But God's favors are wholly good.

Mecklenborg also noticed that God is described as both "Helper" and "Saviour." One who needs help requires added strength, while one who needs to be saved is utterly helpless. Here, Mecklenborg quotes biblical verses to show that God is the only true Saviour.

The above example shows that whenever Mecklenborg noticed an anomaly in the *nosah*, he tried to detect a deeper meaning that it might hint at. "Good" favors, the textual proximity of the "creator" to those favors, God being both a "Helper" and a "Saviour"—Mecklenborg discovered meaning in all of these nuances. His practical advice would have been for us to think about or even visualize these deeper ideas when we recite the particular words hinting at them.

As I mentioned, I am particularly fond of *Siddur Iyyun Tefilla*. In my opinion, it is the finest practical application ever of the intellectual approach to prayer. But it still cannot be denied that the intellectual approach has its drawbacks, specifically in the dissonance it creates between the words the *mitpallel* says and what he really means. Remember that for Albo, even though one talks to God directly during prayer and asks: Him to respond, God does not respond personally to any prayer. We noted that this may somewhat divorce what a person *means* in prayer from the words he actually says. This same dissonance became more explicit for Mecklenborg when he tried to apply Albo's philosophy to the text of the siddur: It forced him to define *tefilla* in two opposite ways, one for the meaning of the words in context and one for its "higher" purpose.

There is yet another point about intellectual prayer that must be made, especially when it is applied to a text, as for Mecklenborg: It diminishes the distinction between prayer and Torah study. In his introduction, Mecklenborg mentioned that he searched for the deeper messages in prayer specifically when he was *not* actually praying. Whenever he found a message that could be used during prayer, he wrote it down so that he could refer to it later when he prayed. However, the fact that preparatory study had to be done *separately* from prayer hints that close textual analysis is not really the same as *kavvana* during prayer, even if the text one analyzes is the siddur and the lessons he learns are about how he relates to God. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz also noticed this problem, and it led him to criticize someone who thought that *kavvana* was an intellectual activity similar to Torah study:

After several years of separation I met a friend who is now the head of one of the *yeshivot* in Israel, and I asked him what he does during prayer, if he has *kavvana*. "Yes," he said, he has *kavvana*. I asked him, "What *kavvana* do you have?" And he explained to me that he thinks about the connection between sentences, between words, between the various sections. He analyzes and thinks about the thing [prayer], and this is what he calls profound prayer, this is what he calls *kavvana* for prayer. I quickly replied that these are the things I do on Shabbat after the *cholent*, that sometimes I think about these problems and look at the books that deal with prayer and analyze it that way. But to consider the *kavvana* of prayer for the Days of Awe to be that a person is involved in the analysis (scientific or otherwise) of a text (even though he didn't call it this, it wouldn't befit him, a Rosh Yeshiva in Israel . . .)?—I cannot agree that this can be called *kavvana*.<sup>5</sup>

Rabbi Steinzaltz is adamant that we not confuse textual analysis of the siddur with *kavvana* for prayer. We will return to Rabbi Steinzaltz's alternative approach to *kavvana* in chapter twelve, towards the end of this book. But for now, how might Mecklenborg have replied to this sort of criticism? He might simply emphasize that he only included ideas that are appropriate for prayer in his siddur commentary. In addition, it is doubtful that Steinzaltz's criticism would have been equally as severe had he been specifically talking about *Siddur Iyyun Tefilla*, which only includes "analyses" with at least the potential for a deep emotional impact. The Yeshiva head he spoke to seems to have been considerably more "dry" when he prayed, more so than the kind of experience that Mecklenborg described.

But this answer does not suffice, because the ideas one encounters in Torah study should *also* have emotional impact on the student much of the time, just like Mecklenborg's kind of prayer! If *kavvana* means to consider an idea with the potential for a heart-rending effect, then it is still not essentially different than Torah study. Ultimately, it is still an intellectual exercise; it is not talking to God. The question is not whether textual analysis (of the Torah, Talmud, or the siddur) is valuable, but whether *kavvana* has anything at all to do with studying a text in the first place. Is *kavvana* closely related to intellectual appreciation? Does the best kind of *kavvana* really have anything at all to do with book-learning? Rabbi Steinzaltz's answer to both these questions is a resounding "No!"

To conclude, Mecklenborg wrote a wonderful commentary on the siddur in the hope that it could unlock the inspiring ideas to be found between its lines. This, he hoped, would inspire *kavvana*. He succeeded admirably, but in the course of what he did he also changed the very nature of prayer and *kavvana*. The point that prayer is meant to influence the pray-er, not God, turns prayer into an activity that, according to some critics, is too similar to Torah study. Torah study is meant to impact the student no less profoundly than prayer. But prayer is meant to be something *different*, a conversation

5. Steinzaltz, pp. 209–210.



with God. It is meant let the pray-er *impact* God at least as much as he is impacted by it himself. But the rational explanation denies this last point. Thus, the idea that God does not respond to prayers on a personal level, because the prayer is primarily for the pray-er, inevitably changes the very meaning of *kavvana*. The change may seem subtle, but its ramifications are actually quite drastic. Prayer becomes a private mental exercise instead of an intense conversation with a God who really listens. The rational approach, even in a meaningful form like Mecklenborg's, may still drain prayer of much of its strength.

## RABBI SAMSON RAPHAEL HIRSCH: EXTREME RATIONAL PRAYER

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's ideology of prayer is similar to Mecklenborg's in principle, but it takes the very same ideas to more radical extremes. Hirsch is most valuable because he leads us to a critical realization about the ultimate implications of rationalistic prayer. We cannot consider everything Hirsch wrote about prayer here, so instead we will address two fundamental points.

First, let us consider Hirsch's definition of the word "*tefilla*" in his theological treatise *Horeb*. Hirsch's etymological explanation of the word, which we will read momentarily, is well-known; there hardly a popular book on Jewish prayer that does not mention it, and there has rarely been an Orthodox synagogue rabbi in contemporary times who has spoken to his congregants about the meaning and purpose of prayer without referring to Hirsch's definition of "*tefilla*." Some rabbis present Hirsch's definition anonymously, as an agreed-upon fact that is known and accepted by all. (This in itself is an indication of the idea's great popularity.) Others ascribe it to Hirsch by name. Though Hirsch was not, in truth, the first to explain the word his way, it was through his theological tract *Horeb* that this particular definition became widely known and accepted. The ascription of it to Hirsch is therefore justifiable.

To understand and appreciate Hirsch's definition of "*tefilla*," we must remember that in the Bible, the verb *le-hitpallel* seemed to have meant "to seek a judgement for oneself," just as *le-hithannen* meant "to seek favor for oneself." When he prays, man wants God to see the justice of his cause and help him directly. As we just saw in the last section, Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenborg accepted the validity of this definition of prayer in principle, but added a new one to it: prayer also means to "decide" in favor of holy thoughts and ideas, and to "cast out" unworthy ones. Both of these realizations have their roots in the fact that the verb "to pray" takes on the reflexive grammatical form in Hebrew.

Hirsch also realized the grammatical point about reflexivity, but unlike Mecklenborg he saw the second definition as the *only* valid one. He saw the first, more traditional explanation of the word as completely illegitimate. Here is how he explains the verb *le-hitpallel* instead:

*Hithpallel*, from which "*tefillah*" is derived, originally meant to deliver

an opinion about oneself, to judge oneself—or an inner attempt at so doing, such as the *hitpa'el* [reflexive] form of the Hebrew verb frequently denotes. In other words, an attempt to gain a true judgement of oneself. Thus it denotes to step out of active life in order to attempt to gain a true judgement about oneself, that is, about one's ego, about one's relationship to God and the world, and of God and the world to oneself. It strives to infuse mind and heart with the power of such judgement as will direct both anew to active life—purified, sublimated, strengthened. The procedure of arousing such self-judgement is called "*tefillah*." In German we call *tefillah* "*gebet*," but the word "*gebet*" only incompletely expresses the concept of *tefillah*. The German word is closer to the idea of a "request," which is only the lowest level of prayer, or else its origin is in the verb "*beten*" in Old German, which if I am not mistaken means "to recite" (*hersagen*) or just "to read."<sup>6</sup>

Hirsch's disapproval of the German *gebet* would be equally valid for the English word "pray." Both words mean to "ask" or "request" according to their etymological derivations, and both retain that meaning in common usage today. In fact, the same is true of the words for "pray" and "prayer" in most modern European languages, and this is no accident: it reflects the simple fact that we *ask* God for things when we pray to Him. But according to Hirsch, all of these languages miss the true point of prayer, a point which is only brought out in the Hebrew word *hitpallel*. For Hirsch, prayer is meant to influence man, not God, and the verb *hitpallel* reflects this purpose. But keep in mind that according to the definition of *hitpallel* accepted by the *rishonim* (and by biblical scholars today), namely "to seek a favorable judgement for oneself from God," the cognate words in European languages express the meaning of *hitpallel* quite admirably!

For Hirsch, in any case, just as the verb for praying is reflexive, prayer also serves a "reflexive" purpose: it is meant for the person who says it, not for God. In this sense Hirsch admirably carries on the medieval definition of prayer as "self-training" (though for Hirsch, "self-discovery" might be more exact). But he went one step further than the medieval Jewish philosophers, and one step further than Mecklenborg. Hirsch actually formulated the most extreme "rational" view of prayer possible. In his paraphrase of the *Amida*, he inadvertently showed what the ultimate implication of his

6. *Horeb*, p. 472 in the English translation by I. Grunfeld (London: Soncino, 1962). But for the sake of convenience that translator decided to avoid all the talk of German words for prayer and instead substitute the English verb "pray." Because I consider this disingenuous, I supplemented the English version with the Hebrew translation by Moses Salomon Arensohn (Vilna: Romm, 1902), pp. 446–447 for the last part of the quotation; Arensohn's Hebrew translation is more faithful to the original German than the English.

For another presentation of this etymology for *hitpallel*, see Rabbi Aryeh Leib Gordon's introductory essay to *Siddur Otzar ha-Tefillot* (Vilna: Romm, 1924), pp. 2b–4a.

rational definition of prayer really is. Let us read his exposition of the Amida's first blessing:

You have recognized Him, the Omnipresent One, as your God and the God of your fathers, Who has revealed Himself to you as the God of your fathers in their lives. He is the Exalted, Almighty, Most Awesome, Most High Omnipotent, Who practices nothing but love everywhere and bears everything in His almightiness and love, who bases the life of the grandchildren upon that of the fathers and redeems them, if they are fittingly educated. Accordingly, you must devote yourself to His service.<sup>7</sup>

Shalom Rosenberg came to the following realization about the above passage:

In this paragraph, whatever its exegetical merits may be, the most instructive thing is the fundamental transformation which took place in the identity of the "you." The "you" is not the Holy One, blessed is He, but the pray-er.<sup>8</sup>

When Hirsch took the rationalistic idea of prayer to its logical conclusion, the result was that one no longer talks to God at all, in any sense whatsoever, but only to himself. Earlier, when we mentioned that rationalistic prayer (such as Albo's) can create dissonance between the words that a *mitpallel* actually says and the concept of prayer in his mind, it was in terms of the *impersonality* of such prayer. For Albo, God never responds personally to a prayer. When one prays he addresses an unchanging Being or Force, not a personal God who is moved by his prayer in an individual way. God's response, if any, is only to the change that has taken place in the pray-er because of his prayer. Thus, when one says "Blessed are You," he may find it hard to reconcile "You" with Albo's conception of God.

But for Hirsch the problem is not just a limited amount of dissonance between the plain meaning of the words and the philosophical view of prayer. The impersonality of philosophic prayer is overshadowed by an even deeper problem. For Hirsch, the text and its true meaning become polar opposites! We address God when we are really talking to ourselves. For instance, in the Sabbath afternoon prayers we say: "I pray to You, Lord, at the fitting time. God, in Your great kindness, answer me with Your true salvation!" (Psalms 69:14). According to Hirsch, we are really saying these moving, powerful words to ourselves. We are not calling out to God for help.

There are definitely people for whom understanding prayer as "self-discovery" causes no emotional conflicts. I happen to know such people personally. But for others (and I must admit that I am among them), such a

7. Ibid., p. 457 (p. 482 in the English version).

8. Rosenberg, p. 103.

view of prayer prevents the kind of emotional depth possible in "simple" prayer. It simply does not let us really mean what we say to God.

Earlier, in chapter four, we tried to defend simple prayer based on the social analogy from its rational critique by saying that the philosophic critique makes major assumptions about the nature of God for no compelling reason. If we admit that the relationship of man to a perfect and infinite God remains entirely beyond human comprehension, then any philosophic critique of prayer based on assumptions about God's supposedly "unchanging" nature which cannot be "subject to outside influences" becomes entirely illegitimate. Rather, the Bible and Talmud consistently declared that man *does* share a personal relationship with God, and that God accepts men's prayers as might a king, a master, or a father. This being the case, it would make more sense for a believing religious Jew to pray "naively" according to the biblical and rabbinic models than to substitute the rational model of prayer in its place.

This theoretical point becomes crucial in a practical way for those (like myself) to whom the new, rationalistic model of prayer hinders *kavvana*. Not everyone finds it possible to make the rational kind of prayer into a deeply emotional experience. This fact led Friedrich Heiler, the great theologian of prayer, to the following negative conclusion about the rational model:

Rational philosophical thought means the disintegration and dissolution of prayer. Prayer, the spontaneous and direct expression of religious experience, is subjected to an alien authority when forced into the categories of philosophical ethics and metaphysical categories of knowledge. . . . The prayer of the philosopher is no real communion as between persons, no intercourse with God, no personal relation, no vital communication with Him. . . .

Natural prayer is indestructible. By its power and passion it lives in all lands and times; still more wonderfully and powerfully it lives in the devotional life of great religious personalities. The delineation of their life of prayer only reveals the philosophical idea of prayer in all its coldness, its lack of life and substance.<sup>9</sup>

Even though what Heiler wrote is absolutely true for many people (including myself), he took the point too far. From a Jewish perspective it is obvious that even though many of our "great religious personalities" were rationalists, their prayer was no more "cold" or "lacking in life and substance" than the "simple" prayer of common Jews. Rabbenu Bahya's moving but thoroughly rationalistic "Petition," which we discussed in chapter five, and Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenborg's testimony about how textual analysis deepened his experience of prayer both constitute ample proof that philosophic prayer can have intense emotional depth and profound religious meaning. Hirsch himself, despite the direct conflict

9. Heiler, pp. 102-103.

between his paraphrase of the *Amida* and its actual words, was clearly a deeply religious man. There are surely many people who find the rational idea of prayer to be emotionally fulfilling, as well as more intellectually satisfying than “simple” prayer.

Ultimately, the decision about whether the rational model of prayer as “self-training” or “self-discovery” helps or hinders *kavvana* must be a personal one. The same is true of “simple” prayer: People who are truly bothered by the philosophical paradoxes of prayer may find that “simple” prayer impedes *kavvana*; but again, the decision is a personal one. It can never be objectively proven that one of these models of prayer is better for *kavvana*, or more legitimate philosophically, than the other. Each has its own strengths and its weaknesses, which affect different personalities in different ways. The final decision about which one to follow is up to each and every individual. Both emotionally and philosophically, both the “simple” and “rational” models remain legitimate options for religious Jews.

### RABBI ABRAHAM ISAAC KUK: PRAYER AS THE ELEVATION OF DESIRE

Years ago, a youth leader in Bnei Akiva, the religious Zionist youth movement, introduced me to the thought of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kuk (hereafter: Rav Kuk, pronounced “Kook”) by saying that if his thought could ever be summarized in a single word, that word would have to be *ehad* (one). I later studied Rav Kuk’s thought on a deeper level, becoming ever more aware of its subtlety and complexity. Yet I still find that this one-word summary holds true, though I understand it somewhat better now. For Rav Kuk, everything is *ehad*: from the vast expanses of the physical universe to the artistic creativity in the soul of a human being; from science and technology to literature and music; from philosophy to mysticism; from the nation-building of the Zionist enterprise to the broad sweep of human history—everything is *ehad* in its essence, and everything is part of an intricate process leading God’s entire Creation towards a state of unity and completion.

The importance of prayer to Rav Kuk cannot be overstated, but it is only one aspect of an overall outlook that also reinterpreted religious ideals such as fear and love of God, *devekut* (“clinging” to God), and especially repentance, which was a major theme in Rav Kuk’s thought. For Rav Kuk, it is not so important to explain prayer per se as to explain the backdrop against which he views prayer, along with these other ways of relating to God. This was recently done in one chapter of the most ambitious and comprehensive analysis of Rav Kuk’s thought yet written, Benjamin Ish-Shalom’s *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook—Between Rationalism and Mysticism*.<sup>10</sup>

10. Chap. five, “The Purpose of Man and Existence” (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1990), pp. 158–170 (Hebrew).

The chapter deals with Rav Kuk's view on the higher purpose of human life and its relationship to the totality of Existence, closing with a description of how for Rav Kuk, prayer becomes the most sublime fulfilment of Man's purpose. We will briefly summarize Ish-Shalom's description here, but readers are forewarned that Rav Kuk's ideas cannot be easily summarized without losing much of their power and complexity. It well worth reading Ish-Shalom's presentation carefully as an introduction, and then studying and reviewing Rav Kuk's writings on prayer in the original. His many comments on prayer, scattered throughout the dozens of volumes that make up his writings, were recently collected in a small but beautiful volume entitled *Orot ha-Tefilla* ("The Lights of Prayer").<sup>11</sup>

Throughout his writings Rav Kuk speaks of the love he feels, powerful love that encompasses humanity, man's mental world, the physical world, and of course God Himself. When one knows that everything derives from God, he cannot help loving all of existence. All the love a person feels for other people or things is not even something that originates from within him, but actually derives from the all-encompassing love of God which became "particularized" when it reached him after descending to our imperfect world, a world of seeming contradictions where the unity and harmony of all is not always readily apparent. It is man's job to expand the love he feels for particular people, or particular things, to encompass an ever increasing range of objects as he continually learns how all things are really just different aspects of one harmonious whole. In this way, he takes the Divine love that became "particularized" in its descent and elevates it back to its source.

Man may be seen as the central organ in the body of existence. His will is continuous with, or in fact identical to, the Will of the cosmos. (Just as his sense of love, when properly understood, can be seen to be the same as God's universal love.) When man elevates his will he elevates everything else along with him, but when he debases his will he lowers the rest of existence with him. This is the source of man's moral responsibility.

But what does it mean to "elevate" or "lower" one's will? For Rav Kuk, it is a dual process that requires both an intellectual and an emotional commitment. One's will must be strengthened, but it must also be properly directed. It is the intellect that can help man see how all of existence is truly One, and how his own will corresponds to the Will of All, which is really the Will of God. What the "service" of God really means (and this term includes prayer), is for a person to strengthen his will and his desires, to feel them passionately, but to do so as he unifies them with the universal Will. This unification is accomplished by the rational mind: human will is raised

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11. *Orot ha-Tefilla*, ed. Moshe Tzvi Neriya (Jerusalem, 1979). The most important thing Rav Kuk wrote on this topic was his introduction to *Siddur Olat Re'iyah* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kuk, 1963). That introduction is included in *Orot ha-Tefilla*.

Also see Y. Moriel, "Ha-Tefilla be-Mahshavto shel ha-Rav Kuk" in *Be-Oro: Iyyunim be-Mahshavto shel ha-Rav Kuk* (Jerusalem: Torah Education Department, 1986), pp. 49-64.

when the *intellect* harmonizes it with God's Will. The intellect thus guides human desire, while that very desire gives the intellect an object to act upon. The intellect on its own, without emotional desire to inflame it, would be impotent.<sup>12</sup> Desire on its own, without the intellect to guide it, will waste itself on trivialities (or worse). Only when the two of them join forces can they both be united with the universal Will shared by all of existence.

This is precisely the deeper purpose of prayer for Rav Kuk: to unify one's will with God's Will. In the highest prayer man is not just expressing his own needs, but the desire of God's entire creation for harmony, for a return to its Divine source. The Will of All is expressed through man when he unifies his "particular" desires with the universal longing for perfection. In this way, the philosophical paradoxes of prayer lose their potency. We need no longer ask how prayer can "influence" God, because there is no need to influence Him. His Will and our wills are identical.

For Rav Kuk, man feels a continual need for wholeness and perfection, for a world in which everything is harmonious. When he prays, this desire is given real expression. And when he elevates his desire during prayer, realizing how everything in the world reflects a different aspect of the true reality, how all of existence yearns to overcome its particularity and achieve harmony, and that his own desires are part of that same yearning, he has reached true human fulfillment.

One cannot fail to notice the strong mystical flavor in Rav Kuk's idea of prayer. The idea that love and desire become "particularized" in human beings, that they must be "elevated" or "reunited" with their divine source, has obvious roots in the kabbala. But Rav Kuk tempers the mystical aspects of prayer with a clear assertion that the emotional (read: mystical) experiences of love and desire must be tempered and guided by intellectual reason. For prayer, as in other areas, Rav Kuk sees philosophy and mysticism as engaging in a mutually-beneficial dialectic. Both are essential parts of being human, and one cannot fully unite his will with God's unless he appreciates both of them.

But Rav Kuk's view of prayer has revolutionary implications for mystical prayer. As we saw in the previous chapter, the dominant trend in Jewish mystical prayer was quietism. This meant that a person and his desires were unimportant; only God was important. It is wrong for a person to "bother" God with his petty human needs. On the contrary, the function of prayer became to free a person from himself, from his worldly needs, from his very personality, and enable him to unite with God. Human needs were expunged from the *kavvanot* of prayer, despite the fact that the plain meaning of all our prayers is shot through with human needs, concerns, and desires.

Rav Kuk was able to reconcile this quietistic mystical view of prayer with

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12. This may seem reminiscent of Rabbi Yosef Albo, but it is not really the same: for Albo, the emotional desire steps aside when the intellect takes over. Rav Kuk would disagree.

the need-awareness its words actually express. For Rav Kuk, our sense of need or desire, far from separating us from God, is the key to uniting with Him. It is only their "particularization" that makes them seem mundane, but when the intellect helps us see them in a broader way, they are revealed as One, in harmony with the rest of existence.

For those who think the self-denial of mystical prayer is an affront to human dignity, Rav Kuk's idea of prayer has a further implication. As Shalom Rosenberg points out,<sup>13</sup> Rav Kuk reconciled the mystical view of prayer with the existential criticisms of it. These criticisms, which we will explore in detail when we discuss Rav Soloveitchik's views on prayer, assert human dignity in all of its fullness, and bridle against the mystical assertion that man's needs are not worthy of his (or God's) concern. They reject the view of prayer that is only concerned with the "higher" of the sefirotic universe.

Rav Kuk said that although the mystical-quietistic and the existential outlooks seem like polar opposites, there is really no contradiction between them. The will of man is the same as the Will of God and the cosmos. When he prays he does not "subjugate" his will to God's, nor does he negate his autonomous existence. On the contrary, his true will is revealed in prayer, and it becomes evident that it is the same as God's Will, the Will of the cosmos. Man does not negate himself when he prays, but learns to see his unique self as one aspect of a truth that is much larger than himself, to see himself as a special part of a harmonious whole, and to see his needs as aspects of the universal needs of creation.

Rosenberg<sup>14</sup> pointed out one more knotty problem that Rav Kuk was able to solve. He dubs the following question the "Theological Paradox" of prayer: How can we talk to God as if His nature corresponded to human nature, as a king or a father or a lover, when we know that we cannot describe Him or understand Him in any objective way?

Rav Kuk's answer is that, indeed, we must not think of God as a human being when we pray. We are not begging for prizes. What we are really doing is "uniting" our desires to a higher, all-encompassing Will that we only partially perceive. In fact, perceiving that higher Will more fully is the true function of prayer. This is the job of the rational intellect.

But then why do we pray to God as we would talk to another person? We do so because, as we said earlier, the intellect on its own is impotent. It must have some inflamed longing or desire to act upon during prayer. The precise reason God appears in anthropomorphic terms when we pray, as the object of our pleas or petitions, is to kindle such desires. In Rav Kuk's words, "Prayer does not desire to change anything in the Divine, which is the source of eternity and unchangeable. . . . It speaks to God *as if* to a king or ruler who might change his mind, *as if* to a father who is ready to

13. Rosenberg, pp. 120–122.

14. While the essential insight is Rosenberg's (pp. 113–114), I have fleshed out his point considerably so as to relate it to previous points we have made about Rav Kuk. Thus, the responsibility for this description remains mine.



change. . . .<sup>15</sup> Rav Kuk continued by saying that the reason we speak to God this way, as if He were changeable, is because the very expression of the desire to rise towards God is in and of itself an elevation of desire, which is the essence of prayer.

But this creates a danger. If a person talks to God *as if* He were a person, he may be led to really think of Him as such. This is why we praise God *before* we arouse our wills during petitionary prayer. Rav Kuk writes that praise is most certainly not a form of bribery or flattery, as we might attempt with a mortal person of authority. Rather, praise is meant for the good of the person saying it. Its job is to disabuse him of the notion that God is anything like man *before* he begins his petitions. This is why the Talmud says that praise must always precede petition.

Thus, like many other thinkers we have studied, Rav Kuk returned to the idea that prayer is not for God, but to edify man. But for Rav Kuk, this was only the case regarding praise. For petition, the situation is ambiguous. I have not been able to find a clear statement by Rav Kuk as to whether, ultimately, prayers are answered in the literal sense. Once I succeed in finding the place for my "particular" needs in the universal Will, which longs for perfection and for all true needs (including my own) to be filled, does my prayer somehow help that higher need (as well as my own) become fulfilled in reality? Does the elevation of desire through prayer, the elevation of the Will of the cosmos, have a direct impact on the *fulfilment* of desire and Will? If Rav Kuk answered this question (indeed, if he was even concerned by it), then I have been unable to understand his answer.

This leads me to the one drawback I have encountered with Rav Kuk's idea of prayer. I say "drawback" with complete humility; I do not mean a drawback in Rav Kuk's idea, but in my own feeble attempts to apply it. The drawback is the same as in all the various reinterpretations of prayer we have studied: dissonance. For Rav Kuk's type of prayer the problem is particularly acute because, as we saw, he explicitly pointed it out as a paradox: We petition God *as if* He were a king of flesh and blood, but He is not. We do so, it might be said, to "fool" our desires onto expression, so that they can be elevated and united with God's will. For Rav Kuk, not only is the dissonance between what we say and what we mean complete, but the lack of agreement is the very essence of prayer! To me, this makes having *kavvana* when I say the words of the siddur quite difficult.

Nevertheless, I find Rav Kuk's view of prayer enticing, and it has an implication for the simple view of prayer that I prefer in practice. As we saw in chapter four, simple prayer—anthropomorphic prayer—always includes a "motivation." The motivation is some argument designed to show a coincidence of interests between the supplicant and the person he is pleading with (in prayer, the latter is God). Rav Kuk's idea that our needs and our longings, to be worthy, must be shown to be aspects of the universal need for completion and perfection, for a harmonious cosmos in which every being has its legitimate place and lacks nothing, is the highest

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15. *Siddur Olat Re'iyah*, p. 14 (my emphasis).

expression I can think of when it comes to a "motivation" for a prayer. What greater reason could there possibly be for God to answer us?

### RABBI YOSEF DOV SOLOVEITCHIK AND THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL PARADOX

Until now we have seen how various thinkers responded to the questions on prayer we posed in chapter three. In particular, we saw how the philosophical paradoxes of prayer served as catalysts for developing rational interpretations of prayer. While all these "older" questions about prayer remain as compelling today as they ever were, a shift in emphasis during the twentieth century has added a new, contemporary set of questions about prayer. These new questions influenced the attitudes of many modern Jewish thinkers who wrote about prayer. Examples of men who were troubled by the "new" paradoxes of prayer include Franz Rosenzweig,<sup>16</sup> and in more recent years Isaiah Leibowitz and David Hartman. But

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16. Rosenzweig's idea of prayer is tied in, of course, with his overall philosophy (as is true of all serious philosophies of prayer). His remarks on prayer have been collected and organized into a coherent framework by Moshe Schwartz, "Ra'ayon ha-Tefilla be-'Kokhav ha-Ge'ula' le-Franz Rosenzweig" in Cohn, pp. 191–206. We will not go into detail about Rosenzweig in the text, because we have already described representative views of modern approaches that his views fit into.

But besides just describing Rosenzweig's views, Schwartz does his best to make them sound revolutionary. However, Rosenzweig's idea of prayer is really not fundamentally different than many earlier "educational" versions of prayer, which valued prayer for how it affected the one who prays. What made Rosenzweig's approach unique is *how* he thought prayer affected the pray-er, but the idea is not as fundamentally new as Schwartz makes it out to be.

Schwartz begins (p. 191) by calling Rabbi Yehuda Halevi's kind of prayer "restorative," which is true—it restores man to the "imitation of prophecy," bordering on actual prophetic experience, that he lost since the last time he prayed. For Hermann Cohen, Schwartz writes, prayer becomes "transformative," meaning that it "allows man to rise from a low existential state to a spiritual level that he never before experienced" (p. 192). He implies that "restorative prayer" represents a new level of thinking about prayer not found in Halevi. But the truth is that Halevi's prayer can be called "transformative" in exactly the same sense; a person (Halevi hopes) strives to come closer than he ever did before to prophecy and to the experience of God every time he prays. To pray is not simply to repeat the same old experience each time.

But even Cohen's "transformative" prayer is limited, says Schwartz, by its lack of attention to the aspect of *time*. Rosenzweig's philosophy is highly concerned with time, and viewing prayer through the aspect of time is what makes his idea of prayer unique. Rosenzweig wanted man, during prayer, to be concerned with the time that is-not-yet, the Kingdom of God at the time of Redemption. He is to bring that which is-not-yet into his *current* life by prayer. Prayer is not to restore a past feeling of completeness, but to bring the true completeness, which the world has never yet experienced, into the present and make it real and true for *now*. The *only* thing a person should ever really pray for is the final redemption. This is why we pray for

there is no one whose views on prayer reflect as complete and wide-ranging an impact of these questions than Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik.

Rabbi Soloveitchik, of blessed memory, was one of twentieth century Orthodoxy's most influential thinkers and leaders; his thousands of students knew him simply as "the Rav." Since I had the privilege of learning most of my Torah from his students, I will refer to him the same way. The Rav's views on prayer, as we said, are the most consequential result of asking new questions about prayer, and addressing them in novel ways. In addition his views, as might be expected, prompted discussion and criticism among his students; his essays and comments on prayer provoked analysis and questioning, and a small but growing literature on the subject already exists. What has already been written on the topic is notable for its sensitivity and its careful criticism. I hope that the following pages will be a worthy addition to the genre.

Rabbi Shalom Carmy, a student of the Rav, recently wrote a sensitive, thoughtful, and thought-provoking essay about prayer based on the categories and modes of thought of his great teacher. We alluded to Rabbi Carmy's essay—and even quoted some of the striking expressions he uses to describe certain aspects of prayer—earlier but now the time has come to discuss it more fully. The title of the essay is "Destiny, Freedom, and the

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the community and not for the individual—because bringing the Kingdom of Heaven to earth is everyone's shared need. A person should not just pray for a small change in his circumstances to alleviate his own suffering; instead he must pray for a radical change in the very nature of the world and its history. His pain is a symptom of a much larger need. True prayer is not just restorative, nor is it just transformative. It is not just concerned with man's past and present state, but with the future. The present moment can be made into eternity through prayer as "the redeeming entry of Eternity into time" takes place.

But as beautiful as this idea is, it is not revolutionary. Halevi's kind of prayer is no less concerned with the vision of the future Kingdom of God in prayer; Rosenzweig himself found this idea in one of his poems (p. 197). It is true that Halevi says the *hasid* calls up glorious images of the *past* to aid his attempt at prophecy. That is because picture images of the past are most easily available to the imagination. But a vision of the future redemption, as Rosenzweig urges for the experience of prayer, is fully in the spirit of Halevi as well.

Finally, the contradiction that Schwartz sets up between Rabbi Yosef Albo and Rav Kuk (p. 196) is just plain wrong. Albo did not think it possible to "change something in God" any more than Rav Kuk. Both are bothered by exactly the same paradox. The fact that Albo finds a way for petition to function in its literal sense, while Rav Kuk does not address the issue directly, does not mean that the latter rejects such a possibility. And Rosenzweig's idea that prayer is "transformative" (in addition to its bringing the future into the present) is exactly the same answer Albo gave, not a new third approach, even if Rosenzweig (like Rav Kuk) was less concerned with prayer's practical consequences. Indeed, Rosenzweig's idea that prayer is only concerned with what might be called the future's "cosmic perfection," where individual needs are seen as just examples for the need for universal change and the end of history as we know it, seems very similar to a lot of things Rav Kuk writes about prayer. Though the similarities may turn out to be superficial, they are still worthy of study.

Logic of Petition,<sup>17</sup> and as the last part in the title indicates, the Rav's thought has significant implications for the logical paradoxes of petitionary prayer.

Rabbi Carmy began his essay by mentioning two attitudes making prayer very difficult, perhaps impossible, for modern man. If the philosophical paradoxes we first posed in chapter three were the conceptual obstacles to prayer in the Middle Ages, then the two attitudes that Rabbi Carmy describes are the equivalent obstacles today. As we shall soon see, these two conflicting attitudes lie at the heart of the Rav's approach to prayer:

Some would allege that modern man has difficulty petitioning God because petition manifests man's awareness of dependence on Him. Modern man feels self-sufficient and powerful. If this is the problem, then the appropriate gateway to petitionary prayer is a better appreciation of the human condition, its fallibility at the physical level, its tragedy at the moral level, the threat of ridiculousness whenever human pretensions go unchecked at either level.

For others, profoundly aware of man's finitude, there is something unbefitting in the idea of petitioning God as a child would beg father or mother for something he wants. God, one intuitively, is too noble to respond to man's parochial supplications; we debase our sublime contemplation of him when we make him the object of our self-interested entreaties. Even when we are assured of God's accessibility, our apprehension of his grandeur may, at moments of high consciousness, extinguish our ability to pray, leaving us able only to acknowledge His praise. For this difficulty the antidote would be a firmer sense of God's unforgettable commitment to the world He created and of the importance of finite man in the divinely proclaimed scheme. Moreover the very fact that God does not merely permit us, but commands us, to turn to Him in prayer, particularly concerning our needs, enables the halakhic individual to overcome the potentially silencing burden of genuine awe and so to find his voice in God's Presence.

The concern in Carmy's second paragraph—that praying to God for our mundane needs debases our conception of Him—was actually a familiar idea in the Middle Ages. Back then, champions of rational prayer asserted that it is wrong to speak to God about petty human needs, and that if petition is legitimate at all in its "simple" sense, it should only be for things of spiritual value. In a similar vein, many rationalists also urged us to keep our requests as general as possible so that we will avoid asking God for particular gifts, implying that we know what is good for us better than He does. Rabbi Yosef Albo, for instance, wrote that is better to simply ask God to "do what is good in Your eyes" because that is inevitably also what is best

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17. *Tradition* 24, no. 2 (1989): 17–37.

for us. Rabbi Carmy is entirely correct that this medieval critique of petition, translated into modern terms, remains a great obstacle to prayer even today. But it is only the first difficulty he mentions—that man feels too “powerful” to pray—that is entirely the product of modern thought.

It is no accident that Professor Shalom Rosenberg raises exactly these same two problems when he discusses prayer in contemporary Jewish thought. He considers them to be two sides of the same coin, both of them parts of what he calls the “anthropological paradox” of prayer. That paradox, as its name implies, deals with the nature of man, and then tries to put man in his proper place vis-à-vis God. One side of this problematic coin is that modern cosmology has removed man from the center of the cosmos. Far from being the pivot of the physical universe, as medieval science thought, our earth is now seen as an insignificant speck on the outskirts of just one galaxy among multitudes of them. Even on this earth, man can no longer be thought of independently from his earthly environment, as lord and master of it, such that he would have special importance in God’s eyes. Human history is just a blip on the scale of natural history, and completely interwoven with it. We are not the masters of our environment, set up by God to rule it, but merely a small intrinsic part of it. This being the case, why should man have any special status in God’s eyes? Why should He value man or his prayers? All of these ideas and questions parallel the problem that Carmy raised when he wrote that being “aware of man’s finitude” can make us feel that petitioning God is “unbefitting” to Him. In a nutshell, man is unimportant. Man is unworthy of prayer.

The second side of Rosenberg’s “anthropological” paradox is that an exactly opposite modern perspective on man’s position in the world is equally possible. From the perspective of moral development, prayer seems unhealthy because it means that man gives in to his petty urges and needs: instead of his overcoming them, they conquer him. This point is not entirely “modern,” but was also used by Jewish mystics in the past to disqualify the “simple” understanding of petitionary prayer. But some modern thinkers take the positive view of man much further: They emphasize man’s independence and dignity, viewing the subjugation of man to God reflected in prayer as self-destructive, an act that lowers man and saps his healthy creativity and independence. According to this Nietzschean view, which became prominent in modern psychology, prayer as subjugation to God crushes man and stifles him. Prayer is a symptom of a major mental illness, created and reinforced by religion. Certainly, this view of man has no place for religion at all, let alone for prayer. All of this parallels the problem that Carmy raised in his first paragraph, quoted above. In short, the second side of the “anthropological” coin is that prayer is unworthy of man.

Whether the vision of “Man” has been lowered or raised in modern thought—and it seems that both happened at the very same time—either way prayer becomes impossible. In modern thought, man is either under-confident or over-confident, too aware of his insignificance or too full of himself. Either way, he cannot pray to God. In the simple idea of prayer, where the man-God relationship is based on the social analogy, man pleads

with God as a servant to his master or a subject to his king. Both personalities in this analogy are human, so the supplicant is not overwhelmed by his benefactor. But in reality, the benefactor is *not* human, it is God Himself! The analogy becomes completely impossible the moment it is claimed that man and his needs are unworthy of God's attention; it becomes equally impossible when it is said that man is too noble to debase himself by utterly subjecting himself to God and depending on Him. It may be said that the social analogies employed in classical prayer are midway between the two extremes of the anthropological paradox. In the social analogy, man is *humble* enough to have need of God, but still *worthy* enough to confront Him. But in the anthropological paradox only the extreme positions are taken: having need of God *humiliates* man, or else he is entirely *unworthy* of His attention. Either way, prayer falls by the wayside.

According to Rosenberg, "the anthropological paradox . . . is the major problem [with prayer] for modern man, who sees his autonomy as his healthy essence. Many answers have been given for this paradox in the twentieth century, their major aspect being an emphasis of the idea that prayer is not something imposed externally but an expression of an inner need, man's way to build his own health."<sup>18</sup> Prayer is something that serves a healthy inner need, not an alien spirit that religion forces upon man. Prayer neither crushes man's spirit nor makes him a slave to his base desires. On the contrary, expressing himself in prayer is necessary for man's spiritual health. Therefore, we can still pray despite the anthropological paradox, because prayer is part of our essence. This basic thrust, as a response to the questions we raised, is the chief statement about prayer by modern thinkers: "The position of refusal to submit to the anthropological paradox may be the final conclusion of religious existentialism."<sup>19</sup> Each in their own way, religious existentialists are forced to show how prayer serves a fundamental and necessary function, not for God but for man.

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18. Rosenberg, p. 117. Rosenberg points out yet another "modern" problem too, which he labels the "theological paradox" (pp. 113–117). When we discussed the rational critique of simple prayer in chapter four, we mentioned that Kant considered simple petitionary prayer to be nonsensical. If God is entirely beyond human categories of thought, then it is ridiculous to try to win His favor with human appeals for justice or mercy. But Rosenberg points out that this implies a further problem, not just for petitionary prayer but even for praise and thanksgiving. Of course, this problem was realized in medieval times as well, and most of Rosenberg's sources for dealing the problem are not modern.

In pp. 115–116 he suggests that perhaps prayer is a mitzva on the *gavra*, i.e., that one fulfils the mitzva not by describing God, but by letting his description of God in "simple" language change something inside of himself. It is the *effect* of prayer on the pray-er, not its content, that is important.

The only problem with this, once again, is dissonance. Such a philosophy makes prayer an outright lie for most people. For instance: How can a person appeal to God's mercy and mean it so that prayer somehow changes him, if at the same time he believes intellectually that God has no quality of mercy with any essential "sameness" to human mercy?

19. Ibid., p. 120.

It is both surprising and fascinating that the Rav himself answered both sides of the anthropological paradox completely in line with the thrust of Rosenberg's discussion, but Carmy solved the very same problem differently in the above quotation, without ever mentioning his *rebbe*. Instead, he simply wrote that a person who thinks he is "above" praying should become more aware of his limitations, his fallibility, and his moral shortcomings. A person who feels too lowly to talk to God should remember that although God seems too great to be approachable, He committed Himself to a relationship with us in the Torah, and He permits us and urges us to talk to Him. In short, Carmy hints that the anthropological paradox requires not an *intellectual* solution but a *moral* one. A person with the proper *middot* (character traits) will be neither too proud nor too humble to pray. This is a fine solution to the problem from the perspective of "simple" prayer based on the social analogy; from that perspective, Rabbi Carmy is entirely correct. But the strange fact is that although the rest of Carmy's article is a superb exposition of themes from the Rav's writings on prayer, the way he answers these two particular questions at its very beginning is *unsatisfactory* according to the Rav's very own understanding of prayer.<sup>20</sup>

Rosenberg, too, failed to notice the impact his questions had on the Rav from both sides (he neglects to mention that the Rav was bothered by the negative side as well, namely that man is unworthy to pray). I don't know why neither Carmy nor Rosenberg mentioned it (though both are undoubtedly aware of it), but the dialectic between these two opposite attitudes, what Rosenberg dubs the anthropological paradox, is central to everything the Rav wrote about prayer. It stands directly behind every idea he expressed about prayer, and even lies beneath some of his halakhic rulings on tefilla. A major tension is revealed in the Rav's writings about prayer, a tension resulting directly from these problems.

Let us get directly to the Rav's views now. As we said, two contradictory questions lie behind them:

- (1) Man is inadequate to talk to God. So how can he be *allowed* to pray?
- (2) By praying, man lowers himself by giving in to his petty needs and desires. And by depending on God to fulfil them, his independent, self-reliant spirit is crushed. So why *should* he pray?

At the risk of oversimplifying, the Rav may be said to have approached the first problem halakhically and the second problem philosophically. Of

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20. Carmy does mention one thing that is clearly borrowed from the Rav: "Moreover the very fact that God does not merely permit us, but commands us, to turn to Him in prayer . . . enables the halakhic individual to overcome the potentially silencing burden of genuine awe. . . ." This is exactly the kind of idea the Rav expressed in "Ra'ayonot" (below, note 21), but with one crucial difference: Rabbi Carmy intimates that the "burden" of "awe" is truly overcome, and allows us to talk to God in our own words (there are numerous examples of this throughout his article). But the Rav himself did not write that a person can talk to God, having been "freed" from this burden. On the contrary, he *forbids* any prayer besides the halakhic prayers because of that burden. All of this will be discussed in detail below.

course, nothing is entirely "halakhic" or "philosophic" for the Rav, who felt that Jewish philosophy is implicit in halakhic categories, and must always be derived from those categories. But it is a fact that whenever he addressed the first question in his writings, he always tried to prove that his answer was both compelling and mandatory by marshalling dozens of halakhic texts and arguing in halakhic terms. When he dealt with the second question he did so on theoretical grounds, without major grounding in the halakhic literature. Even his writing style is significantly more formal and legal in his discussions of the first question, characterized by arguments and prooftexts. His essays on the second question are not.

There are four specific essays by the Rav that are of major import for prayer; I will name them here so that interested readers can consult them, and so that the roots of our discussion in the Rav's writings will be clearer. The Rav dealt with the first question, the "halakhic" one, in an early Hebrew essay called "Ra'ayonot al ha-Tefilla,"<sup>21</sup> and then later backed up his claim in one of his most brilliant and famous talmudic lectures, a lecture that was later committed to writing and published under the title "Be-Inyan Semikhat Geula le-Tefilla."<sup>22</sup> The second question, the one he answered "philosophically," was addressed most directly in an English-language article entitled "Redemption, Prayer, and Talmud Torah";<sup>23</sup> in "The Lonely Man of Faith," perhaps the Rav's best-known article, he also made some important points about prayer, which we will return to at the end of this chapter.<sup>24</sup> It is striking that the ideas he expressed about prayer in the two Hebrew articles are never even hinted at in the two English articles (with the possible exception of a short tangent at the end of "Redemption"). There is a clear dichotomy in the Rav's writings on prayer, a dichotomy so severe that it tempts us to recall the inner contradictions on the same topic within Rambam's writings (which we described and tried to reconcile in chapter five). For the Rav, the inner contradiction is rooted in two opposite problems that he answered in two very different ways.

The Rav's solution to the first problem (that man is too lowly to confront God) has far-reaching halakhic implications for how religious Jews may pray. His answer to the second problem (that prayer degrades man) does not. In this sense, as well, the way he deals with the first question may be thought of as "halakhic," and his approach to the second as "philosophic." It is his halakhic argument—the way he tackles our first question—that will astonish readers the most.

21. "Ra'ayonot 'al ha-Tefilla," *Hadarom* 47 (1979): 84–106; reprinted in *Ish ha-Halakha: Galuy ve-Nistar* (Jerusalem: Torah Education Department, 1979).

22. "Be-Inyan Semikhat Geula le-Tefilla," in *Shiurim le-Zekher Avi Mori* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kuk, 1978), pp. 35–57.

23. *Tradition*, Winter 1983, 17, no. 2: 55–72.

24. My attention was drawn to the passages on prayer in "The Lonely Man of Faith" by Hartman, *ibid.*, pp. 133–138, who collects them in those pages.



## MAN MAY NOT PRAY WITHOUT THE HALAKHA

In "Ra'ayonot" the Rav introduced his answer to the first question by saying that it derives from the halakha's response to a clear halakhic issue, an issue involving a prohibition. The nature of that prohibition is shocking: In principle, wrote the Rav, it is forbidden to talk to God!

"Man is inadequate to talk to God," we asked, "so how can he be allowed to pray?" The Rav accepted this question on its own terms, granting it full validity. Then he immediately drew the most obvious conclusion from it: prayer must actually be forbidden, at least in principle. He emphasized more than once that this is a true, binding halakhic prohibition. The upshot is that man is generally forbidden to approach God and talk to Him, and the only time he may do so is for prayers that are the exception to the rule and which the halakha allows *despite* the overall prohibition. These are the prayers for that there is historical precedent, which the Patriarchs or the prophets offered to God and He accepted. Their act of praying (and God's acceptance) is the halakhic *matir*, the legalizing factor that allows us to say these same prayers ourselves, following in their footsteps. The Temple sacrifices, which were also a permissible way for man to approach God, are equally valid for a *matir*. That is why the times of our prayers are based on the sacrifices.

The Rav, in line with Rosenberg, also mentioned that prayer is an existential necessity. A person cannot be healthy without it. Man has an inner need to commune with God, to communicate with the infinite, and the halakha could not entirely deny this healthy desire. So the halakha had to allow prayer. But since the general prohibition remains in force, the halakha only allows it at certain times and according to a prescribed format and text, so as not to violate the overall prohibition against prayer.

The practical upshot of this is that man may not pray to God *in his own words*. He may only pray following the exact halakhic forms (and texts), because they are the *matir* for prayer. This idea of the Rav's is revolutionary in the history of Jewish prayer. In fact, in the entire history of Judaism, the Rav may have been the first person ever to make this extraordinary claim.<sup>25</sup>

If I may say so, the Rav was the first great talmudic scholar since the Middle Ages to pose an entirely new "paradox of prayer," one which we didn't consider previously because it was not brought up as such by any previous thinker. It is, of course, the anthropological paradox, but the Rav put it into halakhic terms: "Man, by nature, should be *prohibited* from praying to God, yet the Torah *commands* him to! Given the transcendent nature of God, how can the Torah tell us to pray to Him?" The Rav answers by agreeing that we don't know *why* we may pray; it seems terribly wrong. But since it is so wrong we ought not to do it any way other—nor any more

25. For this extreme conclusion, see "Ra'ayonot," p. 103. Some mystics may have made the same claim, but for kabbalistic reasons and not with halakhic justification. The Rav seems to have been the first to try to show that it is halakhically forbidden.

often—than our worthy ancestors did it. God found their prayers worthy, and so we adopt them. But we are forbidden to add any others on our own.

The truth is that man's inadequacy to talk to God was not completely unnoticed in the Middle Ages. Rabbenu Bahya alluded to it in a passage we quoted earlier, but didn't see it as a paradox:

You are high and exalted while *I am only poor and unimportant, too small and petty to ask You for anything or call to You or praise and sanctify Your name*, which is sanctified by the high and holy angels. Rather, what has brought me to do this is that *You commanded me to pray to You*, and *You permitted me to praise Your exalted Name* as far as my understanding of You allows, while emphasizing my utter servitude and submission to You.<sup>26</sup>

The parts I emphasized make exactly the same point that the Rav made. Both Rabbenu Bahya and the Rav felt that in principle, man is "too small and petty" to approach God, and that he may only do so is because God "commanded" us and "permitted" us to do so in the Torah. But according to Rabbenu Bahya, this undeniable fact implies exactly the opposite of what the Rav thought it implies. For Bahya, once God gave us permission to approach Him, to pray to Him, that permission is *complete*. The concern that we are unworthy of approaching God need never deter us from sincere prayer, at any time. Man is allowed to pray, both the halakhic way and in his own words, simply because God wants him to. Contrary to the Rav, our discussion of Bahya's views on prayer made clear that Bahya thought of halakhic prayer as a concession to human limitations. He felt that the true goal of prayer—the real reason God wants us to pray to Him—can only be achieved when halakhic prayer is supplemented by voluntary prayer in a person's own words. As his remarkable *Bakkasha* shows, Bahya fulfilled what he wrote about free personal prayer in his own prayer-life.

So the Rav's idea that it is forbidden for a person to pray in his own words is a radical new concept. What Bahya wrote is the natural implication of the anthropological paradox, not what the Rav wrote. This is because, as we said a number of times earlier in this book, prayer is not the only area of Judaism that raises logical inconsistencies. It is only a symptom of a larger metaphysical problem, namely that man sharing any relationship whatsoever with God is impossible to understand in human terms. If taken to its logical extreme, the rationalistic view of God makes the entire Torah impossible. There can be no revelation, no covenant between God and the Jewish people, and no mitzvot at all, including prayer. Thus, when we *accept* the Torah from God we implicitly *reject* the rationalistic assumption that God is unapproachable. Our relationship to Him is not prevented by His transcendence. It is in this context that we must understand the Torah's *obligation* and *permission* to talk to God, and this is Bahya's point. The fact that God urges us to pray to Him only makes sense from within this

26. Source 20 in reading 2, below (emphasis added).

context. He Himself urges us to talk to Him *in human terms*, to express ourselves to Him *in our own words* as we would to another person. He does *not* want us to act as if He is entirely transcendent, but to relate to him based on how we relate to other human beings, based on the social analogy. But if prayer remains essentially “forbidden,” and if, as the Rav wrote, we may not talk to God in our own words but only with standard halakhic formulations, then God remains transcendent. We cannot relate to Him if we cannot talk to Him as to a person, and prescribed texts alone cannot meet this need. According to this line of thought, prayer cannot be essentially “forbidden” as the Rav understands it. Thus, there is a legitimate alternative to the Rav’s views in the thought of Rabbenu Bahya. Both approaches are valid conclusions by two very great thinkers, and Jews today may draw on either of them when they formulate their own approaches to prayer. But it seems to me—and this may be nothing more than the result of my subjective preferences—that Bahya’s path is the more natural one for a religious Jew to take.<sup>27</sup>

Though the Rav made every attempt to ground his claim that freely worded prayers are forbidden in the halakhic sources, the undeniable fact is that the sources he quoted in “Ra’ayonot” do not absolutely prove his contentions. His prooftexts can be interpreted in other ways as well, and so other approaches permitting informal prayer remain valid. Moreover, Rabbi David Hartman, in his “Halakhic Critique of Soloveitchik’s Approach to Prayer,” analyzed the Rav’s proofs in “Ra’ayonot” one by one, showing that none of them seem to have anything to do with the Rav’s thesis when they are read in context. Hartman’s arguments are convincing for the most part.<sup>28</sup> Rather than repeat Hartman’s detailed work, I will add two critical

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27. Contrary to my claim that Bahya’s is the more natural conclusion, some may argue that the Rav’s approach is *ein lekha bo ela hiddusho*. This means that when there is an exception to a general prohibition, we do not extend whatever limited permission we are given beyond its explicit bounds. So we should only pray the way we know is permissible from precedent.

But this is to argue within narrow halakhic terms after accepting that there is, indeed, a prohibition in the first place. Bahya claims, on the contrary, that despite our own awe of God’s transcendent grandeur, He never made any prohibition at all about man approaching Him. There is no prohibition that needs to be lifted, period. This, it seems, is what makes the Torah possible in the first place, as we said above.

28. Hartman, pp. 150–159. But one of the Rav’s prooftexts needs more explanation than Hartman gave it. The Rav’s best proof—and what I consider to be the best proof by far that prayer is meant to be a fixed text, better than any of the others we will discuss later, in chapter eight—is from the talmudic options on the content of the short prayer said by a person in a dangerous place. The Talmud (*Berakhot* 29b) gives four different options, upon which the Rav asked: What difference does it make? A person cannot fulfil his obligation to pray through this “short prayer” in the first place, so why is it so important what he says? His answer is that it is *forbidden* to pray outside of the rabbinic *Amida*, so each of these four options gives a very limited kind of petition: The first says that we may only ask God to “Do what is good in your eyes.” The next two allow the pray-er to go further by asking God to hear Israel’s cry and answer them (the only difference between

points about the Rav's proofs that a person is forbidden to pray outside of the halakhic framework or in his own words. The first point (A) is a technical detail about how the Rav treats one of his sources, but it has wide implications for the Rav's overall approach to Jewish philosophy. The second point (B) is a general one about Hazal's attitude on a person's freedom to approach God in prayer.

(A) First, the technical point: The Rav mentioned *tefillat nedava*, voluntary prayer, in "Ra'ayonot." Hazal did *not* limit prayer to the three daily prayers alone (as the Rav wished to say), but permitted voluntary prayers in addition to them. Of course the Rav realized this, and he mentioned *tefillat nedava* after he claimed that additional prayers are forbidden. How did he deal with the existence of *tefillat nedava* in the halakhic framework? He simply wrote: "We are not familiar with arranging a voluntary prayer. Therefore, we do not say it nowadays."<sup>29</sup>

At face value, this statement seems incredible. How can the fact that *tefillat nedava* was dropped in practice justify a claim that additional prayers are halakhically forbidden? It is clear that *tefillat nedava* was actually said in talmudic times. Were Jews back then wrong for saying it?

It seems that the deeper idea the Rav was trying to express is that the

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these two is a different choice for one synonym). The last actually allows openly asking for Israel's physical needs in a general way. But none of them, said the Rav, allow the person to pray for his own specific need. This is because petition is forbidden outside of the fixed prayers.

Hartman (pp. 154–155) responded that these four prayers may have been meant as *examples* of short prayers, not as the only possible options. The only problem with this answer is that at the end of the passage the gemara adds that the halakha is in accordance with the fourth opinion. So these were *not* just examples of a prayer that was essentially free and completely open to expression. A real halakhic decision was involved, as the Rav said.

I suggest that what is important here is not the four *texts*, but the competing themes. It is not the exact wording that matters, but the basic gist of what one should say to God. In this, I am reading the passage as the Rav did. The difference is that I don't posit that themes have anything to do with how much petition is legitimate. They simply provide models for how detailed a short prayer during time of danger can or should be, and the kind of sentiments one should express in it. The exact words don't matter, and this passage says nothing about a person not being allowed to ask God for help with his needs.

The only remaining problem is why two prayers differing in only one word are cited separately in that case. I think it is because the passage is citing what these rabbis actually used to say, word for word. What is important is the themes, but the examples are real-life ones, preserving the exact words that were used.

Nevertheless, I grant that the Rav's reading of this passage is especially strong, and that neither my own explanation nor Hartman's is fully convincing. Despite this, as we shall see in chapter eight, the rabbinic evidence on the question of fixed-prayer-texts is ambiguous and contradictory. There are a number of equally convincing prooftexts for the opposite position. The one we have been discussing is the absolute best one in support of the fixed-text position, and even it is not unanswerable.

29. "Ra'ayonot," p. 89.

true nature of prayer's religious reality is that man is afraid, and correctly so, of approaching God. Therefore, even if *tefillat nedava* is technically permitted (based on the fact that voluntary sacrifices were also permitted), the fact that Israel stopped reciting it over the course of history is indicative of the truer, and deeper, Jewish and halakhic view of prayer. True prayer means, according to the Rav, that man never approaches God unless he is commanded to do so, unless there is a halakhic precedent for him to do so. *Tefillat nedava*, though technically permissible, does not reflect the true ethos of prayer, and that is why the Jewish people ultimately abandoned it.

However, this in itself raises a major problem for the Rav's approach to halakha and philosophy. As we mentioned earlier, the Rav championed the view that Jewish philosophy should always be derived from halakhic categories. Jewish philosophy divorced from halakha cannot reflect the true essence of Judaism. But what the Rav wrote about *tefillat nedava* raises an incisive problem: Which halakha should Jewish philosophy be based on? On contemporary halakhic practice (which abandoned *tefillat nedava*) or on the halakhic principles of the Talmud (which deal with *tefillat nedava* as an intrinsic and legitimate aspect of prayer)? When the halakhic ideal conflicts with practical halakhic realities, which do we base our *hashkafa* on? In this case, the Rav clearly chose to base his philosophy of prayer on the practical halakhic reality, which dropped *tefillat nedava*. But there is no reason a philosophy of prayer modeled on the talmudic ideal of prayer, including *tefillat nedava*, is any less legitimate.

In this case, the Rav's methodology brought him close (though I am sure unwittingly) to Isaiah Leibowitz's cynical view of *kavvana* during prayer. Leibowitz was aware of the numerous talmudic exhortations about *kavvana*, but wrote that centuries of reciting the same texts again and again from the siddur could not help but become a fixed routine with no deeper meaning. Leibowitz concluded that the "true" nature of Jewish prayer lies in rote recitation, not in the talmudic ideals of *kavvana*. For Leibowitz, we pray simply because God commanded us to say the words. To obey God's will is the only purpose of prayer, its only "*kavvana*." If God had commanded us to chant nursery rhymes instead of to read the siddur, prayer would still have exactly the same meaning. *Kavvana* is not any more important for prayer than for any other mitzva, not even the most basic *kavvana* of paying attention to what the words mean. All of this is borne out by the fact that the popular practice of rote prayer overcame the halakhic ideal of *kavvana*.<sup>30</sup>

Surely, the Rav would have been horrified by such an idea about *kavvana* for prayer. Yet when he based his philosophy of prayer on the reality of Jews praying only when they are obligated to, concluding that *tefillat nedava* is not something to actually be done, his method was not far removed from Leibowitz's. Both took the halakhic *reality* as their starting point, rejecting talmudic principles and ideals that are not reflected in common practice. This should serve as an indication of a real danger involved in the Rav's

30. For discussion of Leibowitz's philosophy of prayer, which this paragraph is based on, see Hartman, pp. 161–166; Carmy, p. 20; Rosenberg, pp. 118–119.

view that any philosophy of Judaism must be based on the halakha. The danger lies in not being wary about *which* aspects of halakha we choose to base our philosophy on. I suspect that the Rav's approach to halakha and philosophy is most productive when the philosophy is based on a balanced understanding of the gamut of halakhic views throughout the ages on a topic, rather than limiting our focus to contemporary practice. Whether we limit ourselves to talmudic ideals, to practical halakha, or to one particular methodology of halakhic analysis, we are bound to be misled when we base a *hashkafa* on the sources we have chosen. We would be on firmer ground if we based our philosophy of prayer on an intricate understanding of the entire range of views on a topic. The Rav's idea of deriving Jewish philosophy from halakha is extremely valuable, but it must be applied with very great care.

(B) The second point about the Rav's attempt to prohibit informal, non-halakhic prayer is that despite the fact that most of them are talmudic, they do not seem to reflect Hazal's common view. Hartman already did the negative work, showing that the sources the Rav quoted do not seem to bear out his contentions. But on a positive level, there are some beautiful *aggadot* negating the Rav's main point that we should feel intimidated by God and not approach Him except when we are commanded to. On the contrary, these sources emphasize that God loves us, and He is always ready and willing to hear our prayers. These statements were collected by Joseph Heinemann, and here are the two best examples:

Rabbi Pinhas said in the name of Rabbi Zeira: If a man of flesh and blood has a patron whom he troubles too often, he (the patron) says: Here is so-and-so who continually badgers me! But the Holy One, blessed is He, is different: As much as you trouble Him, He will accept you. This is the meaning of the verse: "Cast your burden on the Lord and He will sustain you" (Psalms 55:23).<sup>31</sup>

It is written: "For the children of Israel, the people close to Him" (Psalms 148:14). Rabbi Zeira said: If a person has a frequent guest, the first time he enters the host seats him on the couch. The second time he seats him on a chair. The third time he seats him on a bench. The fourth time he says, "The bench is so crowded—so-and-so is badgering me!"

But the Holy One, Blessed is He, is different: Every time Israel converges on Him by coming to His place of prayer it is a joy for Him. Thus it says, "For what great nation is there that has a god so close at hand as is the Lord our God whenever we call upon Him?" (Deuteronomy 4:7).<sup>32</sup>

31. *Yerushalmi Berakhot* 9:1; cited in Heinemann, *Ha-Tefilla be-Mahshavat Hazal* (Jerusalem: Amana, 1960), pp. 48–49 (no. 68).

32. *Midrash Soher Tov* 7; cited in *ibid.*, p. 49 (no. 69). Also see sources nos. 70–75

The Rav might have reconciled his view with Rabbi Zeira's by saying that when Rabbi Zeira said that God welcomes prayer, he only meant the fixed prayers. (This is easier to claim for the second passage than for the first.) Or he might simply have responded that these *aggadot* reflect an attitude towards prayer different than his own, and that his own attitude better reflects the accepted halakha. In truth, we will never know how the Rav would have responded to alternative views of prayer. But it is clear that there is valid basis for views that disagree with his. It is equally clear that he regarded his own view, with its prohibition of extra-halakhic prayer, as the correct one.

One person who sometimes watched the Rav pray on weekdays told me that he gained the impression that the Rav recited the words of the siddur, not adding personal petitions in the *Amida* even though they are halakhically permissible. If he is correct, then the Rav carried out his extremely conservative views on the prayer-text in practice. Another friend suggested that his extremely conservative views on the format of prayer and its text, views that seem to allow no room at all for personal expression, may have had a polemical basis: the Rav may have emphasized the unchanging nature of prayer because his primary audience was made up of Orthodox American rabbis and rabbis-to-be who were his students. The suggestion is that he didn't want any of these men to make any changes at all in synagogue prayer under the influence of Reform or Conservative alterations, and this is the source of the extreme positions in "Ra'ayonot."

In fact, the Rav did write one short essay on prayer that was essentially a polemic against Reform innovations in prayer and the architecture of the synagogue. He wrote that prayer is essentially an intense personal encounter with God, a lonely confrontation and a difficult experience. Therefore, all of the architectural and musical glory that Reform synagogues copied from the churches are out of place in Jewish prayer.<sup>33</sup>

This attitude fits in well with the attitudes the Rav expressed about prayer in "Ra'ayonot." There too he wrote that prayer results from an intense personal need, and that the experience of approaching God is accompanied by individual, existential terror. Thus, it is at least possible that a distaste for innovations by reformers had at least some impact on the Rav's rejection of informal non-halakhic prayer even by Orthodox Jews.

However, this alone cannot account for the Rav's views. A casual reading of "Ra'ayonot" gives too strong an impression of being the deeply-held feelings of a complex religious personality, not the angry sentiments of a polemicist with an axe to grind. Furthermore, it would be entirely unlike the Rav to create a halakhic prohibition out of thin air, unless he was truly

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in the same book. In this quote, I took the liberty of quoting the entire verse for Deut. 4:7; in the standard printings of the midrash only "as is . . ." is quoted.

33. "Tefillatam shel Yehudim" in *Ma'yanot* 8: *Tefilla*, pp. 9–11. Similar sentiments about mixed-seating in the synagogue are cited in Hartman, p. 146. Prayer is supposed to be a lonely experience, without the security and comfort provided by a spouse and children.

convinced that it was a conceptual necessity for resolving textual issues in the Talmud. In his essay "Be-Inyan Semikhat Geula le-Tefilla" he did just that—he used his principle that prayer is essentially forbidden as the master key to solving a variety of textual and conceptual difficulties in the halakhic sources on prayer, all at once. Many ways he interprets the Talmud and later halakhic sources in that essay are radically new, and some are hard to swallow,<sup>34</sup> but once the Rav's interpretations are clear, they all fit together like pieces of a puzzle into a larger scheme of interpretation that the Rav created based on this one new principle. To those who have studied his interpretations of the Talmud, this scenario is entirely familiar. To me, it is the greatest possible proof that the Rav meant what he wrote about prayer just as sincerely as he meant the countless conceptual innovations he offered to help solve other talmudic issues. The Rav's new ideas about prayer, radical as they may be, are not polemics. They are sincere attempts to understand the Torah.

Thus far, we have only seen how the Rav responded to one side of the anthropological paradox. The idea that man is unworthy of prayer had far-reaching consequences for him, to the point of forbidding non-halakhic prayer. But there is another anthropological problem on the other side of the coin, one which claims that prayer is unworthy of man. This opposite question led the Rav to show that prayer is entirely consistent with—even necessary for—human dignity. We briefly mentioned that David Hartman found the Rav's sentiments about man's unworthiness to pray very hard to accept. Hartman champions a view of Judaism in which man's dignity and autonomy, his independence and initiative, are central to all mitzvot, and he wishes this to be true of prayer as well. This is what lies behind his opposition to the Rav's views, an opposition we will return to later. For now, it is sufficient to say that the Rav's views on the second question,

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34. This is true of some textual interpretations in the article that are directly related to chapters of this book. Two points in particular are radical new interpretations that are also quite difficult to accept ("Be-Inyan Semikhat Geula le-Tefilla," p. 45):

- (1) The Rav claims that the *hiddush* necessary for *tefillat nedava* is that there must be a new *need* that brings one to pray, not that he must *express* that need (although he may). It seems to me that the Rav would translate "*lehaddesh bah davar*" as "to make something new *through* it" instead of "to say something new *in* it" (the second is the way the phrase was understood in the past). The Rav brings no proof at all for this assertion other than the fact that it fits in well with his theory of prayer needing a *mativ*;
- (2) About the talmudic opinion (*Berakhot* 28b) that prayer that is *keva* means "whoever cannot say something new in it" (*lehaddesh bah davar*): The Rav says this means that a person may not pray unless he has some new need of God. But it does not mean one needs to change the words of the prayer, only to be cognizant of the new need! This interpretation is extremely difficult to accept, because if the Rav is correct then why did Rabbi Zeira say, "I am able to say something new in it, but I worry that I may become confused"? Rabbi Zeira clearly thought that *lehaddesh bah davar* meant changing the prayer-text. But the Rav did not cite Rabbi Zeira's comment.



which we will now begin to discuss, are ideas that Hartman welcomes wholeheartedly.

### PRAYER AS NEED—AWARENESS

Remember that we are now focusing on the *second* of the two questions we raised earlier: "Praying to God humiliates man, and he further degrades himself by giving in to his petty needs and desires. So why should he pray?" The Rav's approach to this problem was to show that prayer is necessary for human growth and development. To be healthy, man must pray.

The Rav developed this aspect of prayer most fully in his essay "Redemption, Prayer, and Talmud Torah," which we mentioned by name earlier. Let us follow the Rav as he develops his thoughts on these three topics throughout the article.

The Rav began by talking about a slave. A slave is unexpressive and dumb, non-reflective with no self-awareness. Like an animal he feels *pain* when he is treated badly, but doesn't *suffer*. The difference is that pain is an instinctive reaction while suffering is a human existential experience. It is conscious. To suffer one must have need-awareness, he must know his circumstances are not as they should be and that they must be changed. Need-awareness implies dignity, which the slave lacks entirely. It should be clear by now that the Rav meant a psychological state when he spoke of a "slave," not a legal, economic, or social status.

The "slave" who feels pain but isn't aware of his needs leads the Rav into a description of modern man. Modern man is an anonymous creation, doomed to be lost and forgotten in the crowded and fast paced world we live in. Modern man is also ignorant of his needs according to the Rav. How he described this ignorance is pregnant with meaning, especially for prayer, so we will cite it in full:

Many would say that to accuse modern man of being unaware of his needs is absurd. The reverse, they would maintain, is true. Modern man is aware of many needs; in fact, there are too many needs which claim his attention. An entire technology is bent upon generating more and more needs in order to give man the opportunity to derive pleasure through the gratification of artificially-fabricated needs.

Though this assertion is true, it does not contradict my previous statement that contemporary man is unaware of his needs. Man is surely aware of many needs, but the needs he is aware of are not always his own. At the very root of this failure to recognize one's truly worthwhile needs lies man's ability to misunderstand and misidentify himself, i.e., to lose himself. Quite often man loses himself by identifying himself with the wrong image. Because of this misidentification, man adopts the wrong table of needs which he feels he must gratify. Man responds quickly to the pressure of certain needs, not knowing *whose* needs he is out to gratify. At this juncture, sin is born. What is the cause of sin, if not the diabolical habit of man to be

mistaken about his own self? Let me add that man fails to recognize himself because he is man. As man, he was cursed by the Almighty, condemned to misuse his freedom and to lose his own self. In other words, adoption of the wrong table of needs is part of the human tragic destiny.

The confusion about one's true needs is typical of man as man, without distinction of life-experience. Does the young man understand his basic needs? If he did, we would have no problem with crime, drugs, and permissiveness in general. Is the middle-aged man oriented toward his real needs; does he know what is relevant and what is irrelevant to him? If he did, there would be fewer deaths from heart disease. Does the old man know what should and what should not matter to him? Let me speak for myself: I know that I am perplexed that my fears are irrational, incoherent. At times I am given over to panic; I am afraid of death. At other times I am horrified by the thought of becoming, God forbid, incapacitated during my lifetime. One of my greatest fears is related to the observance of the Day of Atonement: I am fearful that I might be compelled, because of weakness or sickness, to desecrate this holiest of all days.

I don't know what to fear, what not to fear; I am utterly confused and ignorant. Modern man is, indeed, existentially a slave, because he is ignorant and fails to identify his own needs.<sup>35</sup>

"Adoption of the wrong table of needs is part of the human tragic destiny," wrote the Rav. But if man, especially modern man, is so confused about who he is and what he really needs, then how is he to be "redeemed" from this "slavery"? The Rav's answer is that while a slave is dumb and non-expressive, he can be freed by first crying out in suffering (this is called *tze'aka*, "outcry"), and then by formulating and expressing the better circumstances that he hopes for (this is called *tefilla*). In the first stage he realizes that *something* is terribly wrong, and cries out to God for help. In halakhic terms, this is represented in the liturgy we call *selikhot* with its specified format. In the second stage he understands what is wrong and verbalizes what he needs to overcome it. This is halakhic prayer, with its own prescribed format.

Awareness of one's suffering and then discovery of one's needs is the essence of prayer for the Rav. It is how prayer redeems man from existential slavery. Unlike the kabbalistic views we studied in the previous chapter, the Rav had no need to justify the fact that petition is the central aspect of prayer, and that prayer's deeper purpose is bound with human needs:

Judaism, in contradistinction to mystical quietism, which recommended toleration of pain, wants man to cry out aloud against any kind of pain, to react indignantly to all kinds of injustice or unfairness. For Judaism held that the individual who displays indifference to pain

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35. "Redemption," pp. 61–63.

and suffering, who meekly reconciles himself to the ugly, disproportionate and unjust in life, is not capable of appreciating beauty and goodness. Whoever permits his legitimate needs to go unsatisfied will never be sympathetic to the crying needs of others. A human morality based on love and friendship, on sharing the travail of others, cannot be practiced if the person's own need awareness is dull, he does not know what suffering is. Hence Judaism rejected models of existence which deny human need, such as the angelic or the monastic. For Judaism, need-awareness constitutes part of the definition of human existence. . . .

God needs neither thanks nor hymns. He wants to hear the outcry of man, confronted with a ruthless reality. He expects prayer to rise from a suffering world cognizant of its genuine needs. In short, through prayer man finds himself. Prayer enlightens man about his needs. It tells man the story of his hidden hopes and expectations. It teaches him how to behold the vision and how to strive in order to realize this vision, when to be satisfied with what one possesses, when to reach out for more. In a word, man finds his need-awareness, himself, in prayer. Of course, the very instant he finds himself, he becomes a redeemed being.<sup>36</sup>

The fact that man "finds himself" through prayer is reflected, according to the Rav, in the very word *tefilla*. Though he admits that the term is ambiguous, he still points out that it means something along the lines of "to discriminate, to evaluate, to understand."<sup>37</sup> Thus, despite its ambiguity, the Rav clearly chose to understand *tefilla* along the lines of Hirsch rather than Radak. "To pray means to discriminate, to evaluate, to understand, in other words to ask intelligently. I pray for the gratification of some needs since I consider them worthy of being gratified. I refrain from petitioning God for the satisfaction of other wants because it will not enhance my dignity." Unlike Hirsch, the Rav puts an emphasis on *tefilla* meaning *asking*. But like Hirsch, it is *oneself* that prayer helps a person understand; it is not God who is being edified.

*Tefilla* is "meditative-reflective" for the Rav, but it is the outgrowth of *tz'e'aka*, which is "immediate and compulsive."<sup>38</sup> This whole progression is very reminiscent of Rabbi Yosef Albo's contention that prayer is first motivated by emotional compulsion, but is only fulfilled when the mind transforms the emotion into an intellectual realization. But for Albo the final realization is about God, while for the Rav it is about man.

In its final stage, man learns something about himself and his true "table of needs" through prayer, according to the Rav. We noted previously that for many proponents of the "educational" or "self-training" philosophy of

36. Ibid., pp. 65-66. Naor, *ibid.*, contrasts these sorts of statements by the Rav with a representative of the "mystical quietism" which the Rav mentioned here.

37. "Redemption," p. 67.

38. Ibid., p. 68.

prayer, the distinction between prayer and Torah study becomes blurred. Thus, it is not surprising that the Rav found exactly the same psychological stages in Torah study as he did in prayer. Remember that prayer begins with silence: the slave is utterly unaware of himself, that he even has any needs. The next stage is the consciousness of suffering: the slave becomes aware that the way he is treated is an injustice. He cries out because of the wrong that is being done to him—this is *tze'aka*. Finally, he becomes fully aware of his situation, formulates his needs in words and demands redemption—this is prayer.

The Rav showed that Torah study follows exactly the same progression as prayer: First, there is “complete intellectual insensitivity and total unconcern.” In the next stage “cognitive curiosity and amazement awaken.” In other words, we realize that there is a problem, that something does not make sense. The final stage, the “redemption,” is when we find the answers in the Torah. Thus, prayer and Torah study follow exactly the same stages, and are in a sense the same: “He is aware of his needs because he prays; he is aware of his intellectual creative capacities because he studies. He is sure that his needs are his own, and that the intellectual capacities are part of himself. This twofold knowledge is cathartic and redemptive.” Prayer and Talmud Torah must both “unite in one redemptive experience.”<sup>39</sup>

Exactly at this point, just before the end of the article, the Rav added an entirely new point. Tefilla is also called *avoda*, like the sacrifices. Previously, we said that tefilla “announces prayer as self-acquisition, self-discovery, self-objectification and self-redemption.” But this second name, *avoda*, means that prayer is also a sacrifice. After man “redeems” and “acquires” himself through prayer, after he becomes whole, he “is summoned to ascend the altar and return everything he has just acquired to God. Man who was told to create himself, objectify himself, and gain independence for himself, must return everything he considers his own to God.”<sup>40</sup> These are the Rav’s final words about prayer in what is probably his most important essay on the subject.

David Hartman is entirely correct that the Rav made an about-face at the end of the article. He attributes this to the Rav’s suddenly returning to the negative theme of “Ra’ayonot.” In “Ra’ayonot,” the Rav emphasized man’s unworthiness to stand before God and pray to Him. Hartman is uncomfortable with that attitude, and he is equally uncomfortable with the idea expressed here that man must offer his entire being to God, to sacrifice himself metaphorically as Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac in reality.

I do not think Hartman is correct when he attributes the “prayer-as-sacrifice” theme of “Redemption” to the attitude the Rav expressed earlier in “Ra’ayonot.” Now, both of the Rav’s ideas—that man is unworthy to pray to God, and that man must give up his very life to God—are expressions of man’s inferiority to God, his utter subjugation to God. Hartman is opposed to either of these feelings being the basis for prayer,

39. Ibid., p. 70.

40. Ibid., pp. 70–72.

and would prefer only to adopt "prayer as self-discovery" or "self-redemption," the major theme of the Rav's article. He thus accuses the Rav of switching direction at the end of the "Redemption" article when it was not called for. But the truth is that these two ideas are simply not the same according to the Rav. The proof is that in "Ra'ayonot," when the Rav justified halakhic prayer despite the general prohibition of approaching God, he cited the sacrifices as one of the precedents *allowing* for prayer. The sacrifices show that man may approach God and enjoy a relationship with Him. They are *not* part of the apparatus of sources the Rav quoted showing that man is unworthy of talking to God and forbidden to do so. On the contrary, they set an important precedent for man's positive relationship with God.

When the Rav brought up the idea of prayer-as-sacrifice as the end of "Redemption, Prayer, and Talmud Torah" the idea was simply that man shouldn't get carried away with the positive attitudes and strong sense of self he gains after he is "redeemed" through his dialogue with God. In a relationship with God a man must not only learn to understand himself and his needs better, but to better understand how he relates to God as well. In other words, man's attitude during an ideal prayer consists not only of dignity, of an awareness of the legitimacy of his own needs (this is the "redemptive" aspect of prayer), but also of humility. This humility is reflected, as the Rav wrote, in the fact that God may demand a man to bend to Him, to return what he has been given in God's service. God sometimes rejects prayers, and he did to Moses, and when He does so a man must comply.

Thus, all of the Rav's "Redemption" article, including its end, is about what man's attitude man should be when he *does* pray. The underlying assumption of the entire article (including its ending) is that man can and should enjoy a relationship to God. Everything the article expresses is an answer to the "positive" side of the anthropological paradox. The Rav shows how prayer is not demeaning subjugation to God as some modern thinkers would have it, but a healthy "redeeming" experience that is rightfully tempered by humility and complete dedication to God. Nothing here is negative; prayer is only positive.

Shalom Carmy, whose essay we quoted at the beginning of our discussion on the Rav's views of prayer, picked up on this theme in the Rav's writings and developed it further. He built on it by first presenting the Rav's basic thesis as an answer to the classical philosophical paradoxes of prayer: "God knows what we need or want even if we do not pray. So why pray?" The Rav's answer, as Rabbi Carmy rephrased it, is that "prayer endeavours . . . not to *inform* Him of our troubles, as it were, but to *formulate* them in his presence" (my emphasis). It is not God who needs to be made clear about human requirements, but man. Man appreciates ideas better when he is forced to put them into words. Thus, talking to God and telling Him what we need is a roundabout way to help us better understand ourselves. This uncomplicated but wise realization about the importance of self-expression answers the other major paradox just as well: "If God decides that a person's wish *ought* to be granted, why is it necessary to pray for it? And if God decides that a person's wish *ought not* to be granted, how

can we presume to change His will by praying?" The Rav's answer would be that prayer—even petitionary prayer—has nothing to do with changing God's will. Rather, it is to help us become aware of God's will for us.

The Rav's answer to "Why do we pray?" is very similar to every rationalistic view of prayer since Rabbenu Bahya, in that prayer is meant to edify the pray-er, not God. But what exactly is prayer supposed to edify us about? Earlier thinkers, such as Bahya and Albo, assumed that prayer was meant to help us appreciate God more. But the Rav's solution contains an important new twist: Rather than inculcating proper ideas and attitudes about *God*, prayer for the Rav is meant to help man better understand *himself*. This fact gives the Rav's solution a clear advantage over earlier answers to the classical paradoxes of petition. Many previous thinkers like Bahya were forced to emphasize praise and thanks over petition, some of them barely tolerating the latter. In fact, their reinterpretations of petition turned it into praise. But the Rav's solution fits in perfectly with the undeniable fact that petition is the dominant aspect of Judaism's major prayer, the *Amida*. The Rav is thus able to embrace petition as a valuable act, justify its objective position as the chief aspect of prayer, and still remain unperturbed by the philosophical paradoxes of petition that plagued previous thinkers.

Rabbi Carmy, however, continues his exposition of the Rav's views on prayer by asking a question which, in my opinion, is out of place. He asks: If the purpose of prayer is to tell us what our true needs are by formulating them and telling them to God, then at the outset how do we know what to ask Him for? And when we do ask him for something, how do we know what His answer is so that we'll know it was right to pray for? After telling Him what we think we need, we don't receive a booming response from heaven saying "yes" or "no." So Carmy's question seems crucial: "Given that the needs which I present before Him are valid, how do I know when to be satisfied with my present state, when to aspire for more?"<sup>41</sup>

The question is certainly a valid one for prayer in general. (I will attempt to address it from the perspective of simple prayer at the end of the next chapter.) It would also remain a crucial and valid question regarding the Rav's views on prayer if the ideas Rabbi Carmy discussed in his article were the Rav's only ones on prayer. But they are not. Carmy never mentions the Rav's extremely negative attitude towards freely expressed prayer in his article; but when that attitude is taken into account, it becomes obvious that this question really has no relevance for the Rav. Carmy's article speaks of personal petitions for specific needs, freely worded, such as the prayer of a barren woman for a child. For such prayers we really do require an answer from God. If He doesn't grant our request, then it becomes hard (or impossible) to know for how long it is right to continue praying. This devastating problem is the central issue of Carmy's article. But as the Rav made clear in his Hebrew articles on prayer, which we surveyed earlier, Judaism only smiles upon the prayer of precedent. According to the Rav, we

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41. Carmy, p. 21.

should only talk to God in the same words that previous generations used. Carmy's question is how we know what to ask God for, and how long to ask Him for it. But according to the Rav, we already know *exactly* what to say to God, because we are doing no more or less than reading the prayers in the siddur.

Not just in "Ra'ayonot," but even in the "Redemption" article that Rabbi Carmy based much of his essay on, the Rav only spoke about the text of the *Amida*. Consider the following passage:

Prayer is the doctrine of human needs. Prayer tells the individual, as well as the community, what his, or its, genuine needs are, what he should or should not, petition God about. Of the nineteen blessings in our *Amida*, thirteen are concerned with basic human needs, individual as well as social-national. Even two of the last three benedictions (*Retze* and *Sim Shalom*) are of a petitional nature. The person in need is summoned to pray.<sup>42</sup>

The Rav's point here is that prayer is based on need; praise and thanks are not at its core. It seems that Rabbi Carmy took "prayer" here in its widest sense, and thus he justifiably asked: If prayer is meant to *tell* me what I truly need, but God does not give a clear verbal answer, then how do I know whether I am right or wrong to pray for some particular thing? But it is clear that the Rav did *not* mean prayer in its wider sense. What he meant was nothing more or less than the *Amida*, as he explicitly wrote. I submit that when the Rav said that prayer "tells" us our needs he meant it in the most literal sense possible. Not, as Rabbi Carmy thought, that the activity or "experience" of petitionary prayer somehow brings a person to deeper understanding,<sup>43</sup> but that the *text of the Amida* literally tells a person what he really needs. Prayer can still be a personal act according to the Rav, because each person can relate the petitions of the *Amida* to his own life in his own way. But in the final outcome it is the text, or at least his understanding of the text, that ultimately "tells" a person what his true table of needs is. Rabbi Carmy's question about how we know what to pray for when we formulate our needs before God is out of place, because the Rav never envisioned a person formulating his needs in his own words. Throughout his article, Carmy speaks of personal petitions both inside and outside the *Amida*, but such petitions are not at all what the Rav was writing about. The formulation which brings us to deeper understanding is the *Amida* and nothing else, so there is no ambiguity about what to say to God.

In case any doubt remains, the Rav wrote this on the next page of the same article: "The hierarchy of needs, clearly defined and evaluated, is to be found in the text of the *Amida*, where not only the emotional need-awareness, but also the logos of need and with it the human being himself

42. "Redemption," p. 65.

43. Carmy, pp. 23, 33.

are redeemed."<sup>44</sup> Prayer is meant to help a person discover his true hierarchy of needs, and to redeem himself by expressing them, but all of this can be accomplished through saying the traditional text of the *Amida*. The question of what specific things to tell God we need never even enters the picture. In short, Rabbi Carmy's question on prayer is an excellent one in general, but it is not relevant to the Rav's views on prayer specifically.<sup>45</sup>

### SOME IMPLICATIONS OF THE RAV'S VIEWS

We have now come full-circle. We began with the Rav's idea that man is essentially unworthy and unable to approach God and talk to Him. Because of this, he is forbidden to pray, at least in principle. Whatever prayer is allowed (or commanded) is only within the formats used by previous generations, and in their words. (We also saw that this position raises grave problems, and that it is not a fully satisfactory reading of the rabbinic sources, as David Hartman showed.) We say the words of the siddur, and *only* the words of the siddur, because we have clear halakhic permission to do so. For talking to God in our own words, we don't. This was the Rav's reply to the first side of the anthropological paradox.

We continued by looking at the Rav's English-language articles on prayer, where he took a much more positive approach. Prayer is necessary for a healthy religious personality, because it helps man better define and understand his true hierarchy of needs. His awareness of his needs and expression of them in words to God may even be said to "redeem" him. Prayer has nothing to do with "informing" God of our needs, or with "influencing" Him to grant our wishes. Thus, the Rav neatly sidesteps the classical philosophical paradoxes of prayer while reaffirming the central importance of petition at the very same time.

It seems that for the Rav, all of this is accomplished through contemplation of the text of the *Amida*, which serves as our guide to our true table of needs. Thus, we return to the notion of prayer within the formats and texts established by earlier generations, but this time from a positive outlook. We use the *Amida* happily, because it serves as the perfect guide to better understanding ourselves, and to redeeming ourselves by expressing our pain and our hope. We say the *Amida* specifically, not just because it is the only prayer allowed but also because it is designed to be the best possible guide to our true table of needs. The halakhic prayer of the *Amida*, far from suppressing man or humiliating him, redeems him. Prayer is a healthy act, a necessary act. This is the Rav's reply to the second side of the anthropological paradox.

Thus, although the Rav approached two opposite questions from two

44. "Redemption," p. 67.

45. Despite this criticism, I do feel that Rabbi Carmy's article is one of the best articles I have ever read on prayer; its ideas on every page are sensitive and thoughtful, intelligent and relevant. I highly recommend it to all readers.



very different directions, his answers are not contradictory. Each answer has a unique thrust and gives a different perspective on prayer, but these perspectives need not clash. When we pray, they complement each other. The two sides of the anthropological paradox express two opposite views of man, but the truth of neither side can be denied: they are both equally authentic and we must keep both of them in mind when we consider the man-God relationship, despite their apparent contradictions. So too, the Rav's two approaches to prayer, which themselves derive from the two sides of the anthropological paradox, can and should be utilized as complementary levels of meaning in prayer. Though their tones clash, they are not mutually contradictory in practice, as we saw. For the Rav, both attitudes are essential to prayer.

But the Rav's two-way approach to prayer had major implications for David Hartman. As we mentioned earlier, Hartman accepts only *one* of the Rav's two theses as a valid model for prayer, because for him the Rav's two approaches form a contradiction instead of a dialectic. He is enthusiastic about the Rav's approach to the second side of the anthropological paradox (prayer as "redemption"), but highly critical of the Rav's approach to the first (prayer as precedent). Hartman makes no secret of the "anthropology" (his own term, which fits this section so well!) lying behind his selective adoption of the Rav's views on prayer. Toward the beginning of his piece on prayer, he wrote:

Whereas *mitzvah* and Torah learning encourage adequacy, assertion, personal initiative, and dignity, prayer could be seen to encourage surrender, resignation, and feelings of total helplessness and dependency upon God. . . . Must the presence of this dimension of the Judaic faith contradict my claim that a covenantal religious anthropology can minimize appeals to divine grace and encourage the development of Human initiative?<sup>46</sup>

It is Hartman's uncompromisingly positive view of man that leads him to utterly reject the negative side of the Rav's approach to prayer and accept only the positive side. In addition, his desire to "minimize appeals to divine grace" also shows that he is bothered by prayer as an activity in which we try to influence God to grant our wishes. It is not so much the medieval preoccupation with God's immutable Will that troubles Hartman, but the fact that petition seems to encourage dependence instead of human self-reliance. (His concern is not theological, but anthropological, as for many modern thinkers.)<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, later in his discussion he follows in the footsteps of medieval philosophers by reinterpreting the function and

46. Hartman, p. 132.

47. In general, medieval thinkers like Albo tried to get around their ideas of God's immutability to justify prayer. Modern thinkers, on the other hand, try to make prayer appropriate to *man* (rather than to God).

purpose of petition. He achieves this by looking more closely at the idea of "need":

There is the need of a helpless dependent person who cries out for help in economic distress or asks the doctor to heal his sick child. Different from this, at least potentially, is the need of lovers to share with each other the situations of vulnerability that either may experience. When you discuss your needs in a love relationship, you do not necessarily expect your beloved to solve your problems. Reassurance and comfort may be gained simply through knowing that your beloved listens to you in your anguish and that you are not alone in your plight. I understand petitionary prayer as expressing the need of covenantal lovers to share their total human situation with God.<sup>48</sup>

Because "need" has this second meaning, the need to share one's feelings with someone who cares, Hartman is able to defend his petition from Isaiah Leibowitz's criticism that prayer should be a way to serve God, not oneself. Prayer—even petitionary prayer—says Hartman, is not selfish gratification but a way of cleaving to God. In the same breath, Hartman has also given a new solution to the paradoxes that Rabbi Yosef Albo posed so long ago. Petition is not self-serving: it does not seek to "influence" God to grant us gifts; it is simply an expression of love for God by sharing one's feelings with Him.

Hartman's description of petition as the "sharing of needs" among lovers has roots in the Rav's views on prayer, at least the part of the Rav's views that he is able to accept. A number of passages in the Rav's famous essay "The Lonely Man of Faith" imply that prayer is part of a love-relationship with God, and Hartman cites these. For instance, the Rav wrote that the prayer-relationship with God was what made it possible for Adam and Eve to initiate a love relationship with each other. He wrote that man is no less qualified than God to initiate a relationship between the two, as is clear from the fact that when prophecy was waning (when God stopped initiating the dialogue with man), the last of the prophets established the fixed prayers so that Israel would continue initiating the dialogue with God. The dialogue of prayer is an intimate and friendly one, like the relationship between God and Moses, which was "face to face" (Exodus 33:11). Finally, prayer must reinforce identification with the needs of others, and therefore is predicated on moral living. The petition is not nearly as important as the worthiness of the person who makes it. All of these points from "The Lonely Man of Faith" indicate that prayer's importance is in its being a dialogue with God, part of an intimate relationship modelled on human friendship and love.

For Hartman, none of this matches the negative sentiments the Rav expressed in "Ra'ayonot." In effect, he claims that the Rav picked the wrong images for prayer in his "negative" articles, such as these:

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48. Ibid., p. 164.

The astonishment of Moses at the burning bush and the terror of the community at Mount Sinai have not been constant normative features of the religious life of Israel. They were unique moments in which an individual or a community was enveloped by a very singular overwhelming manifestation of God. Such experiences do not represent the norm of what it means to live in covenantal relationship with God.

Hartman is correct that the intense fear and trepidation felt by the prophet are the exception rather than the rule. But they are exceptional in their *intensity*, not in their basic validity as a religious attitude. Even those who are not prophets cannot help being aware of God's distance and power, and difference from ourselves, feeling some level of trepidation when encountering Him, if they are honest with themselves. It takes a deep awareness of God's greatness to introduce intense fear and terror when one confronts God, and the prophetic experience is only the privilege of a few. But this does not mean that fear and trepidation for an encounter with God should be entirely absent from the prayers of all other Jews.

Hartman writes that the Rav's negative images are not normative. But the same could be said for his own image of prayer as a love-relationship. The theme is prevalent in the Song of Songs, to be sure, and in a few kabbalistic prayers, but it is uncommon in the statutory daily prayers. Hartman prefers social models for the man-God relationship that imply *equality*: lover, friend. But in our prayers, social models of *authority* are much more prevalent: God as King, Lord, or Master. These appear in every blessing we say. Less prevalent is God as Father, which implies love but also authority. Twice a day we recite a blessing recounting God's love for us, but the love is described as that of a merciful father, hardly a description of an equal. God as Israel's Lover, or the beloved of the soul Jew, is rare in our prayers. The kabbalistic song *Yedid Nefesh* comes to mind along with a few other examples, but they are scarce. There is no escaping the conclusion that while rabbinic prayer depicts God as loving us, it does not portray prayer as a dialogue between equals. In short, Hartman's interpretation of praying as the sharing of feelings with an equal, without expecting real help, is dubious. Rabbinic petition does imply authority and dependency.

Hartman's worry that a sense of dependency on God also constitutes a lack of self-reliance and an affront to human dignity is an issue beyond the scope of this book. Suffice it to say that the question of *bitahon* (reliance on God) versus *hishtadlut* (human effort), where one should end and the other begin, is a question that has been discussed for centuries. It is a major theme in *Hovot ha-Levavot* and the *Kuzari*, and many different solutions have been proposed. But it is not enough of a concern to reject the very real feelings of unworthiness and trepidation that can legitimately rise when one speaks of an encounter with God.

Thus, Hartman accepts just half of the Rav's approach to prayer because he only accepts the legitimacy of half the anthropological paradox. He is willing to ask (and answer) the question of why man *should* pray if he is so important, but he is unwilling to ask why man *may* pray since, compared to God, he is insignificant. Hartman welcomes the idea that far from demean-

ing man, prayer “redeems” him. But he refuses to acknowledge the fundamental religious truth that God is transcendent as well as immanent, that if an infinite God may somehow be approached, then finite man must do so with fear and trepidation.

By accepting one question and rejecting the other, Hartman gains an experience of prayer that is entirely to his liking. But it seems that his approach is based on a fallacy. Remember that the “simple” view of prayer based on the social analogy, where a person’s attitude when he prays is modeled on human dialogue, simply rejects the validity of the various paradoxes of prayer. If there is a relationship between God and man, then the “simple” approach assumes that relationship is beyond man’s understanding. It has no practical reason to question that relationship in logical terms, because God allows man to model his prayers on the social relationship between humans. In simple prayer, man talks to God based on a human frame of reference that he can understand. But the various rational approaches to prayer, including Rav Soloveitchik’s, reject the “social” model because they accept the validity of the paradoxes. This forces them to redefine the nature and purpose of prayer. On the one hand, for the Rav God’s utter transcendence precludes freely-expressed prayer. This transcendence also makes the “simple” idea of petitioning God ridiculous. But on the other hand, man’s innate dignity and spiritual worth still require him to be “redeemed” through prayer. Because the Rav accepted the philosophical paradoxes, he rejected the simple social model of prayer and substituted a new model in its place.

Hartman’s fallacy is that he rejects the simple idea of prayer but won’t fully accept the implications of the paradoxes that result when he does so. He accepts God’s transcendence in principle—after all, the prophets were terrified by His revelations—but refuses to let the idea impact how he prays in any way. But when it comes to man’s dignity, an idea with which he is thoroughly comfortable, he is willing to let his qualms about the dishonor implied by petition bring him to reinterpret prayer as a sharing of feelings between equals, not a real call for help.

Hartman says that there are two opposite models, and so we must choose between them. He chooses the positive side of the model alone. But the anthropological paradox is a paradox precisely because both (opposite) sides are true. We cannot escape from either side when we encounter God in prayer, and thus, for the Rav, prayer becomes a dialectic between two distinct attitudes and emotions. Some of his articles express one set of attitudes and do so uncompromisingly, while other articles express the other set of attitudes. But both become unavoidable parts of prayer once one leaves simple prayer by embracing the questions about it.

Considering the paradoxes seriously led the Rav to present prayer in two different ways. This same consideration led Hartman to choose between the two different models, to take one and leave the other. Given the fact that both models are valid and essential parts of the Jewish tradition (even according to Hartman), I submit that the Rav’s approach is both more meaningful and more cogent.

However, I do share Hartman’s discomfort with the Rav’s assertion that

the halakha limited prayer to the format and text of the siddur. As we mentioned earlier, this need not be thought of as the true attitude of Hazal. Unlike Hartman, though, I do not think the way to resolve this difficulty is by rejecting one half of the anthropological paradox and accepting the other. Man is *both* a creature with self-awareness and dignity who needs to pray to God, and a creature who is intellectually limited, physically restricted, and morally disappointing that he has no right to talk to God. Neither of these opposite assertions can honestly be denied. But if we do accept the part about man's having no right to talk to God, then how can we justify informal petitionary prayer? Must we reject it, as the Rav did?

Simple prayer of the social analogy answers the Rav's two questions the very same way Carmy did in the passage we cited earlier. In essence, simple prayer claims that the anthropological paradox is not so much an intellectual dilemma as a moral failing, a lack of *mentchlikheit*. As Carmy wrote, a person must be aware of his limitations and failings, and of his need for God's help. This honest attitude is all one needs to prevent falling into the trap of thinking that he is "above" pleading with God. Similarly, a person must be aware that God Himself cares about man and listens to his prayers, a point that is made undeniably clear in the Bible and Talmud time and again. When God veritably *invites* a person to pray to Him, the simple response of a *mentsch* is to accept the invitation. This, as we saw, was Rabbenu Bahya's response to the problem. The fact that God *asks* us to carry out a relationship with Him on human terms should be enough to cancel the terror and trepidation preventing an encounter with the Infinite, and to erase any concerns about prayer being essentially "forbidden."

Biblical man was powerfully aware of these paradoxes, as the psalmist cried out in wonder, "What is man that You have been mindful of him? Mortal man that You have taken note of him? You have made him little less than divine, and adorned him with glory and majesty!" (8:4-5). Yet when he prayed, biblical man still spoke to God after the example of speaking to another man, because he knew that God had a "human" relationship with him whether it made rational sense or not. This included petition in its most literal sense. For biblical man, the anthropological paradox was a wonder, but not an impediment to prayer. He accepted the questions, but he saw no need to redefine prayer in order to answer them. Simple prayer preserves the option of talking to God in one's own words, without debilitating terror, despite the questions the Rav raised.

For the Rav, however, the paradox was an existential religious reality, not just a source of wonder. He completely reinvented prayer because of it, including his radical new halakhic prohibition on free prayer. By its very nature the paradox raised by prayer cannot be solved. That is why, when we demand a solution for it, we are forced to reject the social analogy and reinvent prayer entirely. But to appreciate the question, and then to put it aside when we pray, is no less legitimate.

Either of these two options is valid. We may accept the paradoxes with all of their implications and redefine prayer accordingly, as the Rav did. This will create tensions and apparent contradictions when we pray. In the Rav's view, this would also result in not talking to God in our own words. Or we

may pray the "simple" way despite the paradoxes, with the assurance that God has allowed us to relate to him based on a framework that we, as humans, can understand. This way, talking to God in our own words remains an option.

But Hartman's view is unacceptable. One cannot reject simple prayer because he poses existential questions, redefine petitionary prayer because of those questions, and then only accept the questions and answers that are to his liking. Though Hartman speaks of prayer as a dialogue in human terms, he rejects simple petition in its literal sense, as we saw. If this is the case, then in my view the Rav provides a much broader existential view of prayer, and a more tolerant one at that.

One last comment about the Rav's views on prayer: It is hard to avoid noticing the remarkable similarity between his view of prayer's purpose and Rav Kuk's, especially how both emphasize need and desire. For the Rav, by helping us find ourselves and understand what our true needs are, we discover God's will for us. For Rav Kuk, when we learn to see our needs the correct way, as part of a larger whole, we find that they are identical with the will of God.

It may be that the similarity is not accidental. The Rav's students report that he while was generally unfamiliar with Rav Kuk's writings, he did see *Siddur Olat Re'iyah*, and sometimes quoted one of Rav Kuk's explanations from it.<sup>49</sup> Rav Kuk's main ideas about prayer and the elevation of desire are all from his introduction to that *Siddur*, and so it is at least possible that they influenced the Rav's thinking on this matter, consciously or unconsciously. But we can never know for sure.

And finally, one last comment on "Rational Prayer in Modern Times" in general. Every approach to prayer we studied, without exception, did the same basic thing by trying to show how prayer teaches or trains a person in some way. For Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenborg, a person is supposed to reinforce the ideas hinted at by the carefully worded text of the siddur, inculcating "good" thoughts and ideas while leaving behind mundane ones. For Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, prayer is meant to inspire thought about man's real nature and his position vis-à-vis God. For both Rav Kuk and Rav Soloveitchik, prayer serves to enlighten man about what his true needs are and how to understand them. All these thinkers avoid the literal meaning of petitioning God, whether explicitly or implicitly. For most religious thinkers in modern times, prayer speaks not so much to God as to man.

## THE PROBLEMATICS OF PRAYER: A SHORT REVIEW

We just finished studying how Rav Soloveitchik's unique approach to prayer, with its complicated dialectic, was created as a response to a pair of

49. I heard this orally from some of his students, but also see *Nefesh Harav*, ed. Tzvi (Herschel) Schachter (Jerusalem: Reshit Yerushalayim, 1995), p. 151. Rabbi Schachter says that the Rav used to cite Rav Kuk's interpretation of the blessing *Vela-Malshinim*.

intractable questions about the nature of the relationship between God and man. Earlier, in chapter five we saw how both rationalistic and kabbalistic redefinitions of prayer also result from a set of fundamental problems with the "simple" idea of prayer. Before that, in chapter four, we saw that even talmudic sages who accepted the basic premises of "simple" prayer found that it forced them to address certain inconsistencies that it raised.

So of the many visions of prayer we have studied in the last few chapters, not a single one existed in splendid isolation. Rationalistic, kabbalistic, and modern approaches are explicitly derived from specific sets of problems. And even the "simple" approach was not free from its own conceptual inadequacies, which were consciously realized by many of those who practiced it. Until now we mostly studied the approaches themselves. We saw how each one answers its particular set of problems, but those problems themselves have not been our primary focus. Now, for the purpose of review and added clarification, instead of focusing on the various approaches to prayer that developed, it will be valuable to show how the very problems prompting them shared a similar development.

In chapter three we posed three sets of questions about prayer. Two of these sets, "Questions on the Acceptance of Prayer (*kabbalat ha-tefila*)" and "Questions on the Nature of Jewish Prayer," include what we might call *responsive* questions. "Responsive" means that these questions call forth different answers depending on the particular version of prayer they are asked about. But the third set of problems, which we labelled "Paradoxes of Prayer," is a group of what might be called *formative* questions. By this we mean that the paradoxes, instead of passively letting themselves be answered in different ways according to each of the various approaches to prayer, actually force those who ask them to criticize prevailing notions and formulate new ways of defining prayer.

It happens that summarizing the sets of *formative* questions on prayer is really quite easy to do. Each set corresponds very clearly to a particular historical epoch, and each has exactly one characteristic that defines it neatly, setting it aside from the others.

Fundamental questioning of "simple" prayer actually began with Hazal themselves, as we saw in chapter four. In that chapter we devoted one full section to the talmudic notion of "futile" prayer, which we described as the "beginning of a problem" for simple prayer. In short, we saw how some important talmudic sages were bothered by the seeming conflict between God as a King who can be petitioned by His subjects, versus the laws of nature that He Himself instituted in our universe. Does God mean for us to pray, and is He willing to grant our prayers, even when we pray for something that goes against the very structure He created for the world? Is any prayer rendered impossible by God's laws of nature? As we saw, the rabbis of the Talmud were divided on this issue.

But take note of a subtle fact: This problem (which, as we saw, was aptly dubbed the "Cosmological Paradox" by Shalom Rosenberg) does not deny the legitimacy of simple prayer based on the social analogy. What it does instead is to stress an implicit inconsistency that arises when a person tries to *live* according to the social analogy in practice. What has actually

happened here is that one human analogy for God, namely the *King* we plead with when we pray, comes into conflict with *another* human model: the *Architect* who designed the universe. God is not only an all-powerful King who grants the wishes of His subjects, but also the ultimate Architect, whose universe functions according to predetermined rules. Both of these human analogies are fine on their own. But when we actually pray they may come into conflict, if we ask the King to violate the Architect's plan! Since the Bible and Talmud used the social analogy for other things besides prayer (such as to illustrate God-as-Creator), the various social models that are proposed may contradict each other at times.

There is a similar conflict that we also mentioned in chapter four, albeit briefly: The image of God as King may also conflict with the image of Him as the Judge of mankind. If we take God's rendering a final verdict every year on Yom Kippur seriously, then what effect can prayer have *after* Yom Kippur? If prayer *can* be effective after God renders His decree, then we dilute the image of God as the supreme Judge, because His decisions will never be final. But if prayer *cannot* be effective after the decree, then we weaken the image of God as the supreme King, who can always respond to a sincere, worthwhile plea from His subjects.

This conflict led some talmudic sages to stress the social analogy of God as King, saying that prayer after Yom Kippur loses none of its power. Others stressed the analogy of God as Judge, saying that prayer after Yom Kippur is subject to heavy limitations. For our purposes, it is crucial that all the rabbis who addressed the problem acknowledged the conflict and tried to deal with it as best they could. They fully accepted the legitimacy of human analogies for God, despite realizing that such analogies lead to conflicts and inconsistencies. The same was true for the conflict between God as "King" and God as "Architect," as we described in detail in chapter four. The question of whether it is "futile" to pray for miracles is, in and of itself, a manifestation of inconsistencies among the various social analogies employed in the Bible and the Talmud.

In the Middle Ages, a new set of paradoxes was posed that completely delegitimized the social analogy for prayer by rendering it absurd; by now, these questions have become quite familiar to us. All of them stress the fundamental point that God is not man; and since He is not man, it is absurd to plead with Him as if He was. Rosenberg dubbed these questions the "Theological Paradox" since they assert that God's nature makes prayer impossible: Why should we bother praying if He already knows what we are going to say? And how can human entreaties ever affect Divine decisions?

The medieval set of "theological" paradoxes may be considered fully *formative* questions. They set the stage for complete rejection of "simple" prayer, and forced the creation of new philosophies of prayer in its place. Specifically, these questions were the impetus behind the various rationalistic and kabbalistic models of prayer we studied in the last two chapters.

In modern times, the assault on simple prayer received a new twist which led it in a novel direction: If medieval questions made prayer *absurd*, modern questions made it *contemptible*. As we just saw in the preceding



sections on the "Anthropological Paradox" of prayer in the thought of Rav Soloveitchik, prayer is alternatively attacked as insult to God or an insult to Man. Either man is not worthy of praying to God, or prayer is "beneath" the fundamental dignity of a human being. Either of these opposite sentiments is enough to make prayer impossible.

Rosenberg considered *all* of the problems with prayer—whether "cosmological" or "theological" or "anthropological"—to be the source of modern man's difficulty with praying. He is undoubtedly correct: all three sets of problems remain potent today. Nevertheless, the sources he cites dealing with the "cosmological" and "theological" paradoxes are almost all talmudic or medieval, rather than contemporary. These paradoxes did not *begin* as modern questions, yet Rosenberg is correct that they remain severe problems, even today. We must conclude that the questions from each earlier stage fully retain their potency, even as they are supplemented by more devastating problems in later stages. The effect is a cumulative one, making praying increasingly difficult in each subsequent era.

To conclude: All the fundamental problems that have been posed about prayer can be grouped into three clearly defined categories, each corresponding to a specific stage in history and each with its own distinct thrust. It is these three groups of questions that provoked great thinkers to formulate the fascinating visions of prayer that we surveyed in the last few chapters. Let us now compare all of the questions explicitly and directly:

## The Problems With Prayer: Three Stages

### I. TALMUDIC PROBLEMS WITH PRAYER

(Rosenberg: The "Cosmological" Paradox)

1. God's World versus Prayer: Do God's Laws of Nature limit prayer? Or does prayer mean asking for a miracle?

2. God's Verdict versus Prayer: Does the idea that God renders a Verdict (especially on Yom Kippur) make praying afterwards futile? If prayer works after Yom Kippur, does this make God's Verdict meaningless?

### II. MEDIEVAL RATIONALISTIC CRITIQUE OF PRAYER

(Rosenberg: The "Theological" Paradox)

1. God knows what we need or want even if we do not pray. So why pray?

2. If God decides that a person's wish *ought* to be granted, why is it necessary to pray for it?

3. If God decides that a person's wish ought *not* to be granted, how can we presume to change His will by praying?

### III. MODERN EXISTENTIAL CRITIQUE OF PRAYER

(Rosenberg: The "Anthropological" Paradox)

1. Man is inadequate to talk to God. So how can he be *allowed* to pray? (In short: Man is unworthy of prayer.)

2. By praying, man lowers himself by giving into his petty needs and desires. And by depending on God to fulfil them, his independent, self-reliant spirit is crushed. So why *should* he pray? (In short: Prayer is unworthy of man.)

Rabbinic scholars in talmudic times failed to understand how the "social" model for God as a King or Father in "simple" prayer could be reconciled with other "social" analogies for God in Judaism, such as God as "Architect" of the world, or God as "Judge" of mankind on Yom Kippur. Social models of God as Architect or Judge insist that God has set an established, unchanging order of things for the world, while the social models of God in prayer insist that He is always ready to change circumstances in response to prayer. The social analogy contradicts itself, causing problems for simple prayer.

Later, medieval thinkers found that simple prayer is inherently senseless because of Who God is.

Most recently, modern thinkers find that their image of Man is incompatible with simple prayer.

These *formative* questions led to the creation of numerous unique alternatives to "simple" prayer. In the next chapter we will summarize these alternatives, along with simple prayer itself, and attempt to reach some practical conclusions.

# Kavvana for Prayer in Jewish Thought: Summary and Conclusions

## PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

A critical danger inherent in Part II of this book ("Kavvana for Prayer in Jewish Thought"), is that readers may be thoroughly confused by the end of it. An in-depth discussion of the gamut of views on Jewish prayer (and even this survey has not exhausted them)<sup>1</sup> may lead some people to throw up their hands in resignation, rather than to pray with deeper understanding.

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1. In particular, two major books on prayer were written in the sixteenth century, shortly after the close of the creative period in classical Jewish philosophic thought. Both of these books are part of larger works. Neither of them is explicitly kabbalistic, though both were influenced by kabbala. Neither can be truly called "philosophic" either, at least not in the classical sense. Unfortunately, discussing these unique works would have gone far beyond the scope of the present volume. Instead, a representative selection on prayer from the one of them—*Netiv ha-Avoda* by Maharal of Prague—is included as a reading at the end of this book.

I'm sorry this volume allows no opportunity at all to discuss the other major tract on the idea of prayer from the sixteenth century, *Sha'ar ha-Tefilla* of the "Mabit," an acronym for Rabbi Moshe ben Yosef of Trani. The Mabit (1500–1580), a major halakhist best known for his responsa, was a descendant of Spanish exiles who traced his lineage to the famous Rabbi Yeshayahu of Trani ("Rid"). He lived most of his life in Safed. *Sha'ar ha-Tefilla* (which is the first part of a larger work called *Beit Elokim*) is most important for its spiritual explanations of talmudic statements on prayer and *halakhot* of prayer. As we said, it is an anomaly as a lengthy, non-kabbalistic work on the *idea* of prayer (as opposed to a halakhic code) from the tail-end of the Jewish Middle Ages. *Beit Elokim* is neither philosophic nor kabbalistic, though it occasionally draws on both kinds of sources. It has been reprinted in clear type with references and punctuation (Jerusalem: Otzar ha-Sefarim, 1985).

Maharal was a younger contemporary of the Mabit living in far-away Bohemia. Like Mabit's *Sha'ar ha-Tefilla*, Maharal's *Netiv ha-Avoda* (part of his larger *Netivot Olam*) examines Jewish prayer by interpreting the talmudic and midrashic state-

After the many ideas and arguments have been heard, when the questions and answers are finished, what should a person think? And how should he actually pray?

I did not want to minimize the complexity of the subject, and so I did not simplify the issues before. But now that we have arrived at our final chapter on the meaning of *kavvana*, the time has come to take the hundreds of ideas we met and put them into some sort of overall perspective.

A good way to start putting our thoughts in order is by looking at the Hebrew terms for prayer again. "*Tefilla*," as we saw, has been interpreted in two different ways. One definition is "to seek a favorable judgement for oneself" from God, with the expectation that He will then come to one's aid. This is the plain meaning of the verb *hitpallel* in the Bible, according to both the *rishonim* and modern biblical scholars. It fits in admirably with the idea of simple petitionary prayer, man pleading with God much the same way as a subject to his King or a child to his father.

The second meaning of *hitpallel* is "to judge oneself," as Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, who popularized this definition, expressed it. The upshot of this definition is that when we pray we are trying to influence *ourselves* in some way, not motivate God to help us. This view of prayer has remained a very popular one for the better part of a millennium. Its champions were most of the great thinkers we surveyed in Part II: Rabbenu Bahya Ibn Pakuda, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, Rambam, Rabbi Yosef Albo, Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenborg, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Rav Kuk, and Rav Soloveitchik. The many great thinkers who espoused this rational redefinition of prayer differed only on the exact way we influence ourselves by praying; many different suggestions were made. But all agree that the literal meaning of petition, even if it is not explicitly denied, becomes unimportant. This is the major feature of the second "stream" of thought on prayer, rational prayer, which is encapsulated in the second definition of the word "*tefilla*" —to judge oneself.

But prayer is also called *avoda*, literally the service of God. And no stream of thought found greater significance in that term for prayer than the kabbala. *Avoda* means that man is not praying for himself, but for God. His *kavvanot*, especially when he prays, bring harmony to the sefirotic universes, so that their *shefa* (overflowing bounty) can also flow down to our physical world at the bottom of the sefirotic ladder. But even our lowly world mirrors the goings on in higher realms. Therefore, prayer can be answered literally is when it is realized that a crisis below mirrors a crisis above; only restoring harmony above will bring peace and prosperity to our world below, as well. But the primary goal of prayer is the well-being of the

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ments that are its sources. Maharal, however, had a more systematic approach to prayer than Mabit; he spelled out his general principles in the early chapters of his work in a clear, organized way, and followed through with them in the way he interpreted dozens of talmudic and midrashic texts in the rest of the book. It is for this reason that we have chosen a selection from the beginning of *Netiv ha-Torah* at the end of this volume to serve as our representative sample of this genre on prayer in Jewish thought.

sefirotic realms, not our own petty human needs. This is what many authorities meant when they co-opted a talmudic phrase and dubbed prayer *tzorekh gavo'ah*, which they used in the sense of "Necessity of the Upper Realm." Mystical prayer is often called quietism for this reason, because it is entirely passive, at least in terms of worldly concerns. Man ignores or denies (quiets) his own human needs, and focuses only on God.

So we have three labels for three schools of thought about prayer. *Tefilla* #1 means an appeal for God to judge us favorably and then come to our aid—this is the idea of simple prayer. *Tefilla* #2 means "self-judgement"; a prayer is meant to influence the one who says it, not God. This is the basic idea of prayer in rationalistic philosophy. And finally, prayer as *avoda*, or *tzorekh gavo'ah*, was given its most far-reaching expression in quietistic prayer which is not at all concerned with man's well-being, only with the *sefirot*.

Like the three labels for prayer, the word "*kavvana*" takes on three different meanings for three ideas of prayer. (1) For simple prayer, *kavvana* means simple sincerity. It means that the *mitpallel* means what he says to God and feels it very deeply. *Kavvana* as sincerity also means that he is not a hypocrite, just mouthing the words while he thinks of something else. It means that the kind of life he lives must reflect the noble sentiments he expresses to God when he prays. Even a human king can only be moved by what he perceives as sincerity, and he can often correctly sense when it is present or absent. God, who knows all of our actions and thoughts, sees exactly how sincere every prayer really is. Since *kavvana* for simple prayer means the depth of a person's commitment to what he tells God, it may be said that *kavvana* is an emotional experience, not an intellectual one.

(2) For rational prayer, *kavvana* means that a person thinks about the moral or philosophical lessons contained in the prayers, without letting his mind wander. It also implies that a person will inculcate these lessons into his personality, and apply them in his day-to-day life. It might be said that while in simple prayer *kavvana* expresses what one *is*, in rational prayer it is what he *becomes*. Rational prayer opens the door for *kavvana* to become an intellectual experience as well as an emotional one: *kavvana* is what one learns from praying. Nevertheless, the emotional aspect may continue to be central, because what one learns, and how one changes by learning it, involves much more than an intellectual realization.

(3) When it comes to mystical prayer we speak of *kavvanot*, in the plural, instead of *kavvana*. This is because the true depth of kabbalistic prayer is in its details. Every word and letter has a specific function in the sefirotic universe, and the ideal *mitpallel* must concentrate on these detailed functions when he prays in order to motivate their occurrence. The system of *kavvanot* requires an intense intellectual effort, coupled with the fact that what the *mitpallel* envisions in his *kavvanot* is also highly taxing emotionally. Only special individuals were capable of praying with the *kavvanot* this way. Later hasidim and *mitnaggedim* made a much lighter demand on average Jews who are incapable of true kabbalistic prayer. Such Jews were simply told to pray, as a general *kavvana*, for the good of the *Shekhina* and harmony among the *sefirot*. But they were still told to avoid the plain meaning of petition. Kabbalistic *kavvana* then became a psychological effort far more

than an intellectual demand, and was capable of being followed by greater numbers of people.

This three-way scheme works just as well for the classical paradoxes of prayer. If God knows our thoughts and our circumstances, then why do we have to pray in the first place? And if an all-knowing God has decided that we ought, or ought not, to receive some blessing, then why should our petitions change His decisions one way or the other?—These questions have been answered in the same three basic ways.

- (1) The first approach is that of simple prayer, in which man petitions God based on analogous circumstances in human society. The questions we posed make such petitioning seem ridiculous. But simple prayer chooses not to answer the questions. This may be because simple prayer is "naive," and one who prays this way only talks to God as he might talk to another human being because he has never thought through the questions or realized their full implications. But I propose that simple prayer, while it is fully cognizant of the questions and aware of their possible implications, consciously chooses to put them aside. This is because any sort of relationship between God and man must remain a logical impossibility to man, and every aspect of such a relationship will inevitably create paradoxes. The mature religious response is simply to accept that God, by giving us the Torah, has already shown us that He values a relationship with us, incomprehensible as it may seem. But since He desires a bond between us, He lovingly invites us to take part in a dialogue with him in terms we can understand, i.e., to talk to Him as we would to another person, and to mean what we say to Him as we would to a person.
- (2) The second approach to the paradoxes of prayer is the rational solution, which stipulates that prayer's main function is to change man, not influence God's decisions. The paradoxes are thus solved by default. This need not mean that praying cannot help us get what we ask for. I suggested that according to Rambam, the connection with God a person achieves when concentrating on Him during prayer results in His *hashgaha* reaching that person. For Rabbi Yosef Albo, changing ourselves through prayer may be the very thing that makes us worthy of having our prayers answered. But these are indirect results. According to all who take the rational approach, the direct target of the words we pray is ourselves instead of God.

In modern times there was a shift in emphasis within this school, partly as a reply to the concerns of religious existentialism. An entirely new question was raised: Isn't prayer unworthy of man? Much has been said about how modern ideas on prayer have left behind medieval concerns and gone in new directions, but in my opinion the change has been overstated. When we say that prayer is meant to change man, to edify him in some way, the question of exactly what prayer does to us is still left open. Most medievals answered that prayer is meant to reinforce proper ideas about God.

The moderns replied that prayer is meant to help man understand *himself* better, or his needs. This served to answer the new existential question as well, but the overall approach—prayer telling something to *man* instead of to God—remains the same as in the Middle Ages. It is also true that the existential preoccupation with man instead of God (with anthropology instead of theology) has lessened the concern with when, how, and why God answers prayers (if He indeed answers them at all in the view of these thinkers). But the fact that religious existentialism has simply ignored these questions has no positive value for prayer in Jewish life.

- (3) In the prayer of mystical quietists, the paradoxes never come up in the first place. We are praying for the *Shekhina*, for the harmony among the *sefirot*. Our own human concerns are secondary at best. How could it possibly be imagined that a lofty spiritual activity like prayer could be for the sake of material possessions or this-worldly concerns? Rather than wasting prayer on ourselves, let us serve God with it by having the right *kavvanot*.

This last course forces us to reject the plain meaning of petition (along with praise and thanks as well). Even the average Jew who is not a *mekubbal* can no longer mean exactly what he says. But it leaves the classical paradoxes of prayer by the wayside.

So we are left with three basic ways of thinking about prayer, each with its own term for prayer, its own idea of *kavvana*, and its own response (or lack thereof) to the philosophical paradoxes. In order to draw in other points that we made and see how they fit into this neat scheme, it will be useful to review the questions we posed in chapter three and review the different ways they have been answered.

What makes a prayer worthy of being accepted by God? And why are so many prayers (even worthy ones) rejected? For simple prayer in the Bible and Talmud, the answer is clear: *kavvana*, sincerity. In the Bible especially, most sincere prayers are indeed answered. But sometimes God rejects prayers, even sincere ones, as punishment, or for other reasons that we can never know.

For rational prayer, the only explicit answer to these questions came from Rabbi Yosef Albo. For him, what makes a prayer worthy of being accepted is when it succeeds in "preparing" the *mitpallel* to receive what he has prayed for. He has to inculcate the idea that to receive the blessing he prays for, he is totally dependent on God. When a person does this and his prayer is still rejected, it is because he remains unprepared to receive what he asked for. He may still need to pray more and with greater *kavvana*, or do some sort of "preparation" beyond prayer, like repentance and fasting. But ultimately, some prayers remain unanswered and we cannot know why.

In mystical prayer, the question may never come up. Troubles below only reflect problems Above, and it is for the well-being of the Above that we pray. However, human needs are a legitimate secondary need in some versions of mystical prayer, because our prayers, by fulfilling their designated functions Above, also serve to draw down *shefa* to us. But the *shefa*

may not be personal. Therefore, the idea has been expressed that no prayer really goes to "waste," that it must have its impact somewhere.

All the streams of thought on prayer unanimously agree that a person should pray even if he knows he is not worthy of having his prayer answered, because they all agree that prayer is a mitzva. In the Bible, even some absolute scoundrels have their prayers answered. (This does not contradict the need for sincerity; it just means that when prayer is accompanied by an act of sincere contrition it can have at least some impact.) For rationalists, if a person is unworthy then that is all the more reason for him to pray, because prayer helps make him worthy! And prayer for mystics has "higher" effects, so it should never be neglected.

The idea that prayer has "higher" effects, that it is for *tzorekh gavo'ah*, means that the mystic need not ask, "What things are fitting to pray for?" But others cannot escape the question. In simple biblical and rabbinic prayer we ask for things of both material and spiritual value. We may beg God for food to eat and physical protection, or we may ask for His wisdom and guidance, or His forgiveness. All are equally valid and legitimate, and there are no compunctions about asking for mundane things. The main difference between biblical and rabbinic prayer on this point is that the latter emphasizes praying for the needs of the *tzibbur* (not that the former denies it). The new emphasis was, as we saw, so that the people as a whole would have a way of continuing its relationship with God that did not depend on the Temple sacrifices.

In the Middle Ages, though, the emphasis was put on asking for spiritual things. This makes sense, since rationalistic prayer is supposed to elevate us and teach us. Why not show ourselves, then, that immaterial gifts are the most valuable and lasting, by asking God specifically for those? And why bother God with trivialities? For Rabbi Yehuda Halevy and Rambam, the question was not so much what we ask for, but what we achieve: prophecy and contemplation, respectively. If we are to ask God for something, then those are the important things we should ask for. For those who do want to ask for other things, Rabbenu Bahya and Rabbi Yosef Albo emphasized asking only for generalities, since God knows what is good for us better than we ourselves do. So medieval thought shifted the emphasis to praying for spiritual things, and things of general good.

In this century, Rav Kuk and Rav Soloveitchik brought the focus back to individual human needs, but they don't tell us what to ask God for specifically. For them, the very purpose of praying is not to ask for things, but to learn what one should really be asking for! Praying helps us see our own needs in the light of God's will.

By saying this, we have already answered the question we posed about *bakkasha* (petition): Is it really the most important aspect of prayer, or are praise and thanks more noble? Rav Soloveitchik, especially, emphasized that petition for human needs is the only true motivation for prayer, explicitly rejecting quietistic mysticism. But for the medieval rationalists petition was not central; they tended to emphasize praise and thanks instead, and for them, even petition was reinterpreted as a kind of praise.



For Rabbenu Bahya, by asking God for what we need we emphasize our dependence and His omnipotence. Such petition is really praise.

It seems obvious that petition is central to simple prayer. It is the motivating factor for most biblical prayers (at least the prose ones). Also, communal petitions make up the bulk of the rabbinic prayer, the *Amida*. The very fact that we model our speech to God on the way we would talk to a human authority figure makes petition a must as the central aspect of simple prayer.

One of the analogies we find in prayer is that of a *servant* pleading with his master. Indeed, Hazal called prayer the “service of the heart.” We already said that the kabbala drew the most radical conclusions from this phrase, claiming that prayer actually *serves* God by bringing harmony to the universes of the *sefirot*, so it is a “Necessity of the Upper Realm.” And because prayer is the service *of the heart*, inward and non-physical, some kabbalists concluded that it is superior to all the other mitzvot as service of God. But what does prayer as “service” mean in non-kabbalistic systems? How can one serve God without actually doing anything at all?

Both simple prayer and rational prayer answer this question the same way. In the Bible, “service” is used not only for the Temple sacrifices, but also in a wider sense for any positive attitude towards God: accepting His rule, seeking Him, loving Him, etc.—also praising Him and praying to Him. By petitioning Him we implicitly accept His rule over ourselves, showing that we depend on Him, and this too can be called *avoda*. Rational prayer was satisfied with precisely the same answer.

One of the last on our list of questions was why *tefilla be-tzibbur* (community prayer) should be more worthy or more effective than the prayer of an individual. At first glance, it seems the opposite should be true: Praying alone provides the opportunity for greater spirituality. We encountered a variety of responses to this question. The kabbala, as should be expected, explains the need for community prayer according to the terminology of the *sefirot*. (The number ten required for a minyan fits into the kabbalistic scheme with particular ease.) The Zohar also provided an idea that translates nicely into non-kabbalistic terms: Every prayer has its own particular quality, so when the whole community prays together the combination of all their prayers is a colorful mix rather than a monotone.

Rabbi Yehuda Halevi said the same thing, but on the negative side: Since very few individual prayers are perfect, when the community prays together the perfect prayers can “cover” for whatever is lacking in the other prayers. He also suggested that what one individual prays for may be harmful to another, and prayer should never be for something hurtful. But to pray for communal needs is always good for all. To pray for the community is also an obligation, because the part must contribute to the whole, of which it is a member like the limb of a body.

Besides Halevi, no medieval rationalist offered an explanation for the importance of community prayer; it seems that they didn’t emphasize it. But when we move to modern times, community prayer became a natural extension of the thought of Rav Kuk. For Rav Kuk, the idea of prayer is to see what one lacks as part of the larger need for perfection in the world around him. The “particular” need must be universalized. One must learn to

see his own needs reflected in the needs of the larger group and identify his needs with theirs.

In simple prayer, *tefilla be-tzibbur* is a common way of applying the social analogy. Not one subject petitioning his king, but a people petitioning their king collectively. This only became revolutionary when it became a daily obligation in rabbinic prayer. The most likely reason this was done, as we saw, was so that there would be a way for the *people as a whole* to serve God besides through the Temple sacrifices. By praying together, each individual approaches God as a member of the covenant. This last point has also been re-emphasized by a number of modern thinkers.

The very last questions we raised had to do with the fixed times of rabbinic prayer, and whether or not prayers should be texts with prescribed wording instead of talking to God in our own words. For the fixed times, the three approaches are clear. The Talmud explicitly states that the times for the prayers are meant to match those of the sacrifices. Rationalists added to this that since prayer is meant to impact on the pray-er, frequent obligatory prayer will accomplish this. Some, such as Halevi, saw this as ideal: Frequent prayer continually serves to *restore* a person to his pristine spiritual state before he falls too low. But others, such as Rambam, saw it as a concession to human frailties, as he saw all prayer. And the kabbala matched processes in the spiritual universe to the times of the day (and consequently to the times of the prayers).

Finally, to the matter of rigidly worded prayer texts. Should we be told exactly what to say to God? Is reciting preset words the ideal way to pray, or just a concession?

Fixed prayer-texts did not exist in biblical prose prayer, but traditional songs were used in the Temple so that those who visited could express themselves with greater formality and grace. But even these formal prayers could presumably be chosen at will and adapted to the pray-er's needs.

The only definite thing we can say about rabbinic prayer is that Hazal fixed the *structure* of the blessings: how many, and on what topics. They did this, as we saw, so that when the Jewish people petitioned God as a whole, they would all ask Him for assistance with the same common needs. But whether Hazal wanted all Jews to recite the same words for the *Amida* is a matter of debate; this debate will be the topic of Part III, so it is beyond the scope of our discussion here. We simply do not know for sure whether Hazal wanted all Jews to recite the same words in the *Amida*, or just petition God for the same basic things (for this possibility, see the next chapter). But one thing can be said for sure: The conceptual basis of rabbinic prayer, namely the social analogy as applied to a nation, does not make uniformly worded prayers *necessary*. It does not negate them either, but even if biblical and rabbinic prayer had some use for fixed prayer texts, there is no question that personal prayer to God in one's own words is still the basic form of prayer. The Temple psalms and the *Amida* were meant to *complement* the informal prayer of individuals to God, not *replace* it. And even these supposedly "fixed" prayers may have been open to verbal adjustments according to the particular needs and desires of the person who said them.

If *kavvana* for simple prayer is to mean what one says, then talking to God in your own words is surely the main way to accomplish this.

Rational prayer can see fixed prayer texts either as an ideal in and of themselves, or as a tool. It depends how prayer is supposed to impact on a person. If prayer is simply meant to teach and review certain lessons, lessons expressed or hinted at in the siddur, then the text itself becomes ideal prayer because an informally worded prayer cannot convey the same ideas. (The figure who championed this position most clearly was Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenborg.) But if prayer is meant to help a person develop in a more general way, such as by helping him realize his dependency on God, then a freely worded prayer may have an even greater impact than the fixed prayers. This was the position of Rabbenu Bahya.

Thus, neither simple prayer nor rational prayer takes an absolute, definitive position on fixed prayer texts. Simple prayer seems to imply a stronger affinity to personal expression than does rational prayer, but neither approach really takes sides. For the kabbala, however, there is no doubt how the question should be answered. Especially in the later kabbala of Rabbi Isaac Luria, not just every word but even the letters of the siddur have mystical significance. Not one detail may ever be changed when we pray, because each has a specific function among the *sefirot*. In the next chapter, we will see the huge impact this idea had on the history of the siddur. But for now, we still have to finish with the ideas behind *kavvana* before we address liturgical history.

We have now summed up our three basic streams of thought on prayer. Hopefully, seeing how they answered basic questions about prayer has made our picture of each one clearer. But understanding has to be followed up by application. Granted that each approach has its own way of answering the questions on prayer, how well does each one work? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each when we actually pray? And is it possible to combine them, to apply more than one of them at a time when we pray? These are the issues we will take up next.

## PLUSES AND MINUSES

Intractable problems motivate creative solutions. If it weren't for the fact that each way to understand prayer lacks something important, the other approaches would never have been proposed in the first place. No single way of understanding prayer has ever been entirely satisfactory to everyone. The different notions of prayer ring true to different people in different degrees because each person weighs their advantages and shortcomings differently. The fact that the ultimate decision about which is the "right" way to pray must be a subjective one should not be surprising, because prayer is a highly personal activity. I will do my best to present the arguments for and against each of the three schools of thought on prayer fairly, but I will also make my own preferences perfectly clear. I don't believe anyone can ever be entirely objective about this topic, because each person is invariably drawn to the kind

of prayer that "works" best for him. The best one can do is to honestly present the claims made by all three sides.

Simple prayer has many strengths, but just one great weakness. Its greatest virtue is that the person praying means exactly what he says. *Kavvana* means simple sincerity, nothing more and nothing less. The reason a person can mean exactly what he says is because of the social analogy. Since God encourages us to model our prayers to Him on interhuman discourse, a person praying to God can talk to Him as a person and bring up the same problems and needs as he would to a human authority who is kind and fair, with the same expectation that a just and merciful God will answer him. When we ask God for something, we really hope that He will grant it. In simple prayer, petition can be real.

The object of simple prayer (God) is also very personal, and this too implies that a person means exactly what he says to Him. God is not some kind of abstract Power who cannot be influenced by human entreaties. The opposite is true: the very fact that God encourages us to talk to Him in human terms implies that He listens and responds in human terms as well. He listens to every Jew's prayer individually, and that is why we can turn to Him and address Him directly, in the second person, as "You." When we speak, He really hears us.

In simple prayer there is no dissonance between what a person says and what he means. "His mouth and his heart are one." If they are not one, then that is what the lack of *kavvana* means. If he mouths the words of a prayer while he thinks about something else, or worse, if he says a prayer but consciously disbelieves what he says—then his prayer is not accepted, because God knows what is in his heart. This, too, is based on the social analogy: when a subject praises or petitions his king, the king will have a good idea whether the speech is sincere or not if he has learned to be a good judge of human nature. The only difference is that God understands us perfectly, while a human king can never be entirely sure he "reads" people correctly. But "sincerity" is the same idea for both. With the social analogy, the difference between God and a human authority is one of quantity, not quality. We treat God as anthropopathic, meaning that we relate to Him based on human thoughts, feelings, and experiences. This fact is precisely what gives simple prayer its power.

Simple prayer can answer the question "What should one pray for?" better than any of the other kinds of prayer. Obviously, for simple prayer what one asks for arises out of his specific circumstances. But if we think we need something, how can we know for sure if it is worthy to pray for, whether we are right to ask God for it? For simple prayer, the answer lies in the motivation. Remember that the motivation is designed to show a "coincidence of interests" between the supplicant and his benefactor. So if his argument would be sincere and effective in a human social context, it is equally legitimate for God. If to another person his petition would not seem petty, or childish, or selfish, but important, justified, and worthwhile, then it is right to ask God for it. It is the purpose of the motivation to convince the benefactor that the request really is something worth granting. So if the motivation for a request would move another person, it can move God as well.

Simple prayer also has the best explanation for why community prayer is so important, and for the structure and format of rabbinic prayer. Without going into detail about it again, applying the social analogy in terms of a *people* petitioning its king has the power to explain all the elements of halakhic prayer cogently. Its structure, and the fact that it is public, allow halakhic prayer to become a form of *avoda* for the entire people of Israel.

The one great drawback to simple prayer is an intellectual one. As we mentioned so many times, most recently in our summary above, simple prayer has no true answer for the philosophical paradoxes. The idea of talking to God the way we would talk to a person raises problems that are impossible to solve logically. God knows what we need before we tell him; it is impossible to influence a perfect and all-knowing God with human arguments; in other words, God is not a man, so it makes no sense to talk to Him as if He was. These problems are the crisis that simple prayer cannot avoid.

The paradoxes leave us exactly two possibilities for simple prayer: reject it (and substitute some other idea of prayer for it), or hold fast to this beautiful idea of prayer, accepting that the paradoxes of prayer are beyond human understanding. In my opinion, the choice should largely depend on two things: (1) How deeply the person making it is bothered by the philosophical paradoxes, and (2) whether he finds the substitutes for simple prayer satisfying and succeeds in praying with *kavvana* according to them. He may not, because the substitutes for simple prayer also have major drawbacks. As we said, it is a subjective choice. Personally, I am willing to accept that the paradoxes are unanswerable, and to pray "simply" despite them. To me, it makes sense that since God desires to have a relationship with me, He invites me to relate to Him in human terms and in human language. So I accept His invitation, even though I don't logically understand why my human entreaties should mean anything to Almighty God. If He thinks they mean something, that is enough for me.

This way of stepping around the paradoxes of simple prayer will satisfy some but not others. For me, it is a perfectly acceptable approach. Leaving the paradoxes unanswered is a small price to pay for being able to pray the way the Torah shows us how to and the way the siddur implies we should, instead of having to completely redefine the whole activity of prayer.

But more than one person has told me they are most satisfied with the rational idea of prayer: Prayer is not to influence God, but to impact upon the person who says it. Some say it is because the paradoxes resulting from simple prayer prevent them from praying that way—this, of course, is a negative reason. But others prefer rational prayer for its positive advantages: First, it is based on a simple yet elegant theory, an idea that makes a great deal of intuitive sense. Second, if we are speaking of the fixed prayers, rational prayer guides us in what to ask God for because it is the siddur itself that tells us what we need. Third, rational prayer always ends with a personal touch: Prayer is really meant to tell *me* something. After I pray with *kavvana*, I never fail to have gained something tangible, because I understand myself and my needs better, or I understand my relationship to God better.

But rational prayer also has a major drawback: if we say that prayer is "educational," that its true purpose is self-training or imparting Torah ideas,

then a certain amount of dissonance inevitably arises between the words of prayer and what the *mitpallel* means by them. Rabbenu Bahya prayed, "I tell You my needs not because You don't already know them, but to make myself more aware of how much I depend on You." This is a noble sentiment, but some will sense that it doesn't really do justice to our petitions either intellectually or emotionally. The words of Bahya's petitions ask God to bless us with various things, but he is really trying to convince himself of something. He means something entirely different than what he says. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, remember, carried this idea of prayer to its most extreme conclusions by paraphrasing the *Amida* and shifting the "you" in the prayer from God to the *mitpallel*. In rationalistic prayer, the pray-er is ultimately talking to himself instead of God.

What this means practically is up to each person. Many people are not bothered by the difference between what they say and what rational prayer really means, so they can pray with great *kavvana* while they carry the assumptions of rational prayer in the backs of their minds. But I know that for myself, the dissonance created by rational prayer is a major impediment to *kavvana*. I find, as Friedrich Heiler did, that rational prayer leaves me "cold," unlike simple prayer, and I suspect that there are many others like me. I simply cannot accept "self-training" as the essential idea of prayer and really pray.

There is another aspect of rational prayer that may be considered a disadvantage or an achievement, depending on a person's perspective. Rational prayer tends to dissolve the differences between prayer and other mitzvot; Rambam, for example, listed prayer as one of a number of mitzvot intended to inculcate "correct" ideas about God. For Rabbi Yosef Albo, all mitzvot "prepare" a person to receive God's *shefa*; the only advantage prayer has is that it is a cure-all that "prepares" a person to receive many different blessings. Rational prayer tends to become related to, and almost indistinguishable from, Torah study because of its intellectual implications. In *Siddur Iyyun Tefilla*, prayer becomes close to being textual analysis of the siddur. For Rav Soloveitchik, a person learns his true table of needs by praying, and this learning process during prayer exactly mirrors the process of Torah study. He describes how prayer is "coming to a realization" about one's true needs, and how we also "come to a realization" the same way about some problem in Torah study. When it is emphasized that prayer is a learning process, prayer as communication is de-emphasized correspondingly.

Hidden behind these ideas is, I think, a certain dissatisfaction with prayer. Other mitzvot, and especially Torah study, lend themselves to rational explanation, but prayer does not (because of the paradoxes). There is therefore a temptation to rethink prayer in terms of other mitzvot. If rationalizing religion is one's primary goal, then making prayer more like Torah study or other mitzvot will seem praiseworthy. But to me, blurring what makes prayer special seems to rob it of its power, and lessen the potential for *kavvana*.

A final disadvantage of rational prayer is in its latent antinomian possibilities. Simple prayer's assertion that halakhic prayer is the continual *avoda* of the entire nation means that it cannot be abandoned or replaced by anything else. Mystical prayer finds essential value in every tiny detail of

traditional Jewish prayer. But for rational prayer, the only true value of prayer lies in the overall impact of the prayer on the pray-er. The details of prayer, its words and its laws, are only secondary, so a person may be tempted to be lax about his observance. And a person who thinks that other activities besides halakhic prayer will better allow him to inculcate religious ideas (for Rabbenu Bahya) or contemplate God (for Rambam) or prepare him to receive *shefa* (for Albo) or find his true table of needs (for Rav Soloveitchik)—may be tempted to stop praying altogether. There is evidence that some Jews really dropped prayer for these reasons in the Middle Ages. It is at least possible that for some people, rational prayer will lead to the abandonment of prayer instead of making prayer a deeper experience.

Let us turn to kabbalistic prayer now, and to its offshoots in hasidic and *mimagedic* prayer. Obviously, for those who accept the reality of the sefirotic universes and understand them, there can be no substitute for prayer with kabbalistic *kavvanot*. Though it resulted in complete and absolute dissonance between the plain meaning of the prayers and what the *mekubbal* meant by them, it most certainly did not lead to rote prayer. The *mekubbal* would say that it led to the most meaningful kind of prayer of all.

Furthermore, this kind of prayer laid the intellectual paradoxes to rest once and for all. It also granted intrinsic meaning to every detail of prayer, every word and every law. It encouraged all Jews to treat the laws and words of tefilla with great respect and follow them carefully.

But historically, kabbalistic prayer became a disadvantage for those not capable of mastering the *kavvanot*. Eventually, the common people were taught that the Hebrew words themselves had certain mystical powers when recited, even without *kavvanot*. They were also told not to pray for themselves but only for the *Shekhina*, which once again created a complete break between the words they said and what they meant by them. This led to binding Jews to a completely rigid text and discouraging them from reading translations even if they didn't know Hebrew. The idea of simple prayer was thus negated, but no true substitute was offered in its place. It certainly implied that there was no room, nor any purpose, to informal prayer. These facts must have contributed to the phenomenon of rote prayer, at least in some degree.

Finally, kabbalistic prayer is actually damaging to those who are just not inclined to the kabbala by nature, whether they are Jews of "simple faith" or people who prefer philosophy. Ironically, the kabbalistic concern with prayer's details because of the assumption that they have "higher" effects—even when not accompanied by *kavvanot*—can lead average Jews to an obsession with doing the activity of prayer "right"; the outcome is that *kavvana* is de-emphasized. I suspect that the common compulsion among religious Jews to "say all the words," alongside total lack of *kavvana*, derives at least somewhat from kabbalistic emphasis on the importance of every detail.

Kabbalistic prayer, then, has no disadvantages in and of itself. The only disadvantage lies in *who* is praying that way. If it is limited to an elite, then it can only be enriching. But if it is seen as the *only* true meaning of prayer, then it implies that the prayers of the masses have little value. This is an unattractive proposition. Its offensiveness is mitigated when it then claimed

that while prayer with *kavvavot* best serves the sefirotic universes, even praying without the *kavvanot* still has some of these important effects. But since the extreme value the kabbala places on every detail remains in place, kabbalistic prayer for non-kabbalists is likely to become more of a ritualistic performance and less of a conversation with God.

As we said, no approach can be fully satisfying. But for myself, I find the simple idea of prayer to be the most cogent and to offer the best possibility of *kavvana*. I have one last argument to offer in its favor.

One fact all agree upon is that the Bible and Talmud represent people speaking to God and pleading with Him as a servant does to a master, or as a child does to his father. This is indisputable. A rationalist will consider this model of praying to be naive or unthinking, and a *mekubbal* may think it is shallow, so both suggest that what prayer "really" means is something quite different. But the fact that we have intellectual qualms about relating to God in this way still does not excuse us from fulfilling the mitzva precisely as the Torah and Hazal expected us to. The mitzva is to talk to Him as to a human being, but alternatives to simple prayer do not do so. Because they drain the words of their plain meaning and fill them with ideas of "self-training" or *tzorekh gavo'ah* it is at least arguable that they are not properly performing the mitzva! They may not be doing what God has asked. Hazal tell us that God has a great desire for the prayers of the Jewish people; He invites us to talk to Him—to truly talk to Him. We should be glad that God desires to have such a close "human" relationship with us, even if we cannot ever make logical sense of how or why such a relationship is possible.

There are responses to the paradoxes, both rational and mystical. But in my opinion, the best approach is to bypass the paradoxes altogether instead of bowing to their framework. It is inevitable that the social analogy of God as "king" or "master" or sometimes "father" will have severe shortcomings; God only has us use it because the human mind is limited. We cannot comprehend God, so the analogy provides us with an intelligible way of thinking about Him when we approach Him in prayer. There is nothing wrong with examining the analogy's shortcomings intellectually. But acknowledging these shortcomings should not keep us from "true" petitionary prayer in the simple sense. It must be remembered that the human social analogy is only supposed to give direction to our words and our feelings during prayer. It is not meant to give us a philosophically consistent model of God, because the latter is impossible.

My personal conclusion about the paradoxes, and what I think is the ultimate justification of the social analogy, is this: *The social analogy is necessary as our emotional guide when we pray; it is not meant to be a philosophically consistent model of God. Only the social analogy can provide consistent guidance for our attitudes and feelings when we pray, guidance that is fully consistent with the words we say to God.*

Therefore, it is better to accept the biblical/rabbinic model of prayer with all of its "human" assumptions, despite philosophical quandaries. Only this can provide consistent guidance for our attitudes and feelings when we talk to God, guidance that is consistent with the words we say. At the same time



it must be realized that the social analogy is a concession to man's limited comprehension of God, but we have to learn to accept that limitation and live with it when we pray to Him.

But the social analogy of talking to God as we would to a person can only be an effective guide if the *mitpallel* accepts its guidance completely, with all of its implications. The main implication is that we really do know how to talk to God. Not that because we talk to God we understand who and what He really is; that is impossible. The true implication is that *He* chooses to relate to us and deal with us as *people*. It means that if God said He listens to our prayers, then we may think of Him listening as a person would. If God said He answers our prayers, then He answers them literally, in human terms as a human king would. God is not man, but prayer to God is in the language of man, and it must mean exactly what the same words would mean in human contexts. Saying that God listens to our prayers means that we know exactly one thing about Him, that He will relate to us in a way we can understand as people. And when we relate to Him in a human way, it must be a true relationship in human terms. Otherwise, the relationship is meaningless.

Thus, to admit the shortcomings of the social analogy from a rational point of view does not mean that the model must be abandoned. But in fact, this is what alternatives to "true" petition inevitably lead to. When one acts on the realization of intellectual shortcomings in the social model and suggests other rationales for prayer, he has in effect discarded biblical/rabbinic prayer and substituted something new in its place.

Now, there is nothing essentially wrong with inventing new explanations of prayer's purpose. But new philosophies of prayer must candidly admit they have abandoned the classical model. Furthermore, the new models do have major disadvantages for the majority of praying Jews who cannot understand the philosophical or kabbalistic backgrounds they are based upon or, even if they do understand them, still find that such prayer does not fulfil their spiritual needs. Here are some weaknesses shared by the rational and mystical ideas of prayer, problems I believe are especially strong ones because of the number of people who may be affected by them:

- (1) Impersonality: Jews feel distant from a God who does not listen in a human way to human pleas for legitimate needs;
- (2) Dissonance: The *mitpallel* cannot fully mean what he says when he addresses God in his petitions. In these kinds of prayer, when we ask God for something the main idea is *not* to move Him to grant it to us;
- (3) Impetus: The desire to pray will be considerably reduced for most Jews if they do not believe that God listens and responds to them in a human way;
- (4) Rigidity: Many of the alternative models imply that there is little value in speaking to God in one's own words; instead, they idealize the traditional fixed text, implying that it is the sum total of true prayer. This also contributes to the lack of meaning in tefilla for many Jews;

For all of these reasons, I believe that the simple idea of prayer is the one that deserves the most emphasis. Though other models are currently more popular in sermons and books, I think that the most basic idea of prayer is the one that should be stressed when teaching people about prayer. Of course, those who prefer other approaches are perfectly entitled to adopt them. But in the final chapter of this book, when we discuss practical ways to make prayer more meaningful, the assumption will be that prayer is no more or less than a "conversation with God" in the most literal sense. "Sincerity" will be our definition of *kavvana*, and the social analogy will stand behind our understand of prayer.

I hope readers will pardon my passion for simple prayer and my taking the opportunity to argue for it here. They are free to disagree, and those who do so will find themselves in the company of some of history's greatest men of Torah. As we said, none of the notions of prayer is fully satisfactory, and each has something special to contribute. None may be rejected out of hand, and all of us should try to learn as much as possible from each of them. Until now we have focused on how they disagree, but now let us see how they may become complementary.

### LEARNING FROM ALL OF THE APPROACHES

The Torah has seventy faces, and all of them are true. Any passage in the Torah, and any mitzva (like prayer) can be understood on a variety of levels, all of them equally true. This is not a high-minded, liberal statement meaning that there is no objective truth, that one may believe whatever he pleases. What it does mean is that thoughtful, carefully argued interpretations that differ radically from one another at the outset, often prove to be complementary instead of contradictory when they are fully understood.

But prayer is not a point a person argues, it is something he experiences. If elements from the three different "streams of thought" on prayer prove compatible to someone praying, then *that* is the proof that they are valid alongside each other. What actually *works* when we pray is far more important than the mutually exclusive positions that have been taken in debates about prayer. When we started our discussion of "*Kavvana* for Prayer in Jewish Thought" we said that prayer is an activity which requires absolute commitment and total conviction in one clear direction. It is hard for a person to pray with *kavvana* if he is wishy washy about why he is praying in the first place. Nevertheless, being certain about how we pray does not mean we have to choose one historic model of prayer and discard the others. It is far more rewarding to draw valuable elements from each school of thought, providing the final synthesis is done carefully and the result is coherent. What will be important for us now is how elements from the three streams can or cannot be combined in the experience of the pray-er, regardless of the exclusive positions that have been taken during theoretical arguments in the past. Each person can do this in his own way.

I have already made it clear that simple prayer is the basic model I accept. But I can also accept elements of the other views as complementary to the

social analogy, though not as substitutes. Others can do the same thing, whether or not their basic idea of prayer matches mine. Here are some general thoughts on how the various concepts of prayer can or cannot be reconciled and combined:

(1) Easiest to combine are the "educational" and "mystical" approaches to prayer. It is easy to see them as two complementary levels of meaning for the same text, both of which are equally true. All Jews can benefit from the idea that prayer reinforces principles of the Torah. And those Jews who understand the *kavvanot* can add that level of meaning while still holding fast to the first. In addition, this combination preserves the possibility of rational prayer for average Jews, while neutralizing the antinomian threat inherent in such prayer.

(2) Simple prayer and rational prayer can also be complementary. A person can believe prayer is a true conversation with God, accept the literal meaning of petition, and also realize that the act of praying serves to reinforce his commitment to serving God. More specifically, it might be said that rational "self-training" is the secondary *kavvana* of the fixed halakhic prayers. There is no doubt that Hazal paid attention to that basic idea they wanted to reinforce among the people when they chose the topics for the *Amida*. This doesn't mean for a minute that the *Amida* is just an educational tool. It is the Jewish people petitioning God together the "simple" way. But even from the perspective of simple prayer, there is nothing wrong with realizing that it also has a secondary purpose.

(3) The hardest conflict to resolve is between simple prayer and mystical prayer. The first difficulty is textual: simple prayer implies that self-expression is important, because sincerity and depth of feeling can be best achieved when you talk to God in your own words, but for the most part, kabbala has thoroughly rejected any freedom of expression in prayer. The Jewish mystical tradition is closely wedded to the fixed text and idealizes its precise recitation, but a rigid text is not conducive to prayer as a conversation with God based on the human analogy. The second difficulty is human need: simple prayer is entirely based on human need, while quietistic mysticism (though not all *mekubbalim*) goes so far as to forbid it. In short, simple prayer cannot abide the mystical kind when it is so strident that:

- (1) It rejects petition for human needs as a travesty;
- (2) It discourages *hiddush*, and doesn't let us talk to God in our own words.

The resolution lies in the first problem, I believe. Not all *mekubbalim* rejected the legitimacy of human need in prayer. Many saw prayer for our needs below and the needs of the *Shekhina* Above to be one and the same. By claiming that human suffering parallels Divine discord, and by finding importance in both, the door is opened for a view of prayer that is both simple and mystical.

However, this kind of simple/mystical prayer can only work if the mysticism is thematic instead of detailed. If the mysticism depends on the precise recitation of exactly the same words every time, with no room for

*hiddush*, then the “simple” aspect of the prayer is likely to be ruined. But if the kabbalistic *kavvana* is a more general one matching the theme of a blessing, instead of complicated numerical combinations dependent on every word or letter, then a simple/mystical kind of prayer, with *hiddush*, becomes possible.

Such a reconciliation between the common “human” understanding of prayer and its mystical conception, if it is possible at all, would be difficult to formulate. Even if it were formulated, it still must be admitted that many of the great kabbalists rejected petitionary prayer outright. So any reconciliation, while it may be valid on its own terms, will not be *historically* true to the views of most great masters of the kabbala.

In the final outcome, which views one chooses and how he combines them is a completely personal choice. In the final chapter of this book I will make a case for how to make simple prayer more meaningful, and some of the ideas will also apply to other models. By all of the views are legitimate, and any combination of them that a person chooses has value if it inspires *kavvana*. I hope that readers will have found practical value in our long and detailed discussion of prayer in Jewish thought, regardless of what conclusions they come to.

## A PERSONAL STATEMENT ON “SIMPLE” PRAYER AND THEODICY

Theodicy is the attempt to reconcile God’s goodness with the evil that exists in the world that He created. The question is unavoidable: He is all-powerful, so why does He allow suffering, cruelty, and injustice? To tackle this problem as a tangent in a book on prayer, offering a neat solution in a handful of pages, would be naive at best and an outright lie at worst. It is no secret that the question of theodicy is as old as humanity, that no one has ever answered it in a way that satisfies the people who ask it. This is why God posed questions when He spoke to Job, but gave no answers. For a human being, there can never really be an answer. After God spoke to Him, the chastened Job responded, “Indeed, I spoke without understanding, of things beyond me which I did not know. . . . Therefore I recant and relent . . .” (42:3, 6). Instead of offering a neatly packaged solution for the problem, the Book of Job shows that no human being can ever solve it. As Rabbi Yannai said in the Mishna: “We are not capable of knowing why the wicked are at peace, nor why the righteous suffer” (*Avot* 4:19).

Despite the fundamental impossibility of a full solution, it is true that partial explanations have been offered.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes suffering can be justified as punishment for our sins. (But God’s words in the Book of Job imply that this is not a satisfactory explanation.) Many deny the reality of evil altogether, calling it a fake or an illusion—this claim is especially prevalent

2. For a general discussion of theodicy in Jewish thought, see Eliezer Schweid, *Le-Hagid ki Yashar Hashem: Hatzdakat Elohim be-Mahshevet Yisrael Mi-Tekufat ha-Mikra ve-ad Spinoza* (Bat-Yam, Israel: Tag, 1994).

in mystical traditions. Yet others adopt the time-honored tradition saying that good can result even from dire circumstances, declaring *Gam zu le-tova*, that God does everything for the best. Incidentally, this last approach has been misunderstood. In the Talmud (*Ta'anit* 21a), the story illustrating that "everything is for the best" is about the Jews being saved from seemingly impossible circumstances by a miracle. In the end, everything really was "for the best." But *gam zu le-tova* cannot justify events that *end* in terrible tragedy and suffering.

What we have said so far about the problem of evil does nothing more than uncover the tip of the iceberg. Because the problem is as old as humanity, it has inspired countless people to say and write what they think about it, and the discussion continues unabated to this very day. But it may be said with certainty that if any of the above solutions were fully adequate, all discussion of the issue would have ended ages ago. The underlying truth is that *all* aspects of our relationship with God and how He treats us are impossible to understand in human terms (especially in rational categories), as we have said a number of times. Why God is concerned about us and what we do, how our actions can be meaningful to Him—none of these things can be understood "logically," and yet the Torah assumes them to be true. To put it simply, the Torah asserts we have a relationship with God *despite* all the paradoxes and inconsistencies that this claim inevitably produces. The activity of prayer as well raises major paradoxes precisely because prayer is part of our relationship with God. And what is true for prayer, and for the very possibility of a human being enjoying a relationship with God, is no less true of theodicy.

Despite the inherent impossibility of answering the question, all of the attempts at solving the problem of evil in God's world are still justified in one sense: Just as Rambam asked people to try to understand God as best they can, even though true knowledge of Him is impossible, so too Jews throughout history have tried to explain theodicy, at least partially, even though the true nature of the problem will always elude us. The idea is that the closer we get to the truth, the better off we are, even if we can never fully attain our goal. But fundamentally there is no solution.

Then why do I raise the problem of theodicy at all? Because there is no way to pray the "simple" way without confronting it. One of the questions we posed earlier is why God does not answer some worthy prayers by worthy people; for simple prayer, this is the problem of theodicy, not just a question about prayer. Furthermore, simple prayer confronts theodicy not just in terms of when prayer is answered, but in terms of the possibility of praying at all. What I mean is that if we do not "explain away" the horrible ways that people suffer like some of the above solutions do, then sometimes it becomes nearly impossible to pray to God with sincerity according to the plain sense of the words. This is especially true when it comes to praising God and thanking Him.

In the prayer *Barukh she-Amar* we praise God ("Blessed is He!") thirteen times. According to the "simple" model of prayer we are supposed to really mean exactly what we say to Him. But how can we mean "Blessed is He who shows mercy to His creatures" when people suffer in the cruelest

ways? Where is His mercy then? How can we say "Blessed is He who well rewards those who fear Him" when pious Jews are forced to live lives of suffering and deprivation? How can we really mean "Blessed is He who redeems and saves" when He fails to? How can we commit ourselves to the opening words of the prayer, "Blessed is He who spoke and the world came into being," when it seems that God would have been more merciful by leaving the world unformed and void?

The same thing goes for prayers of thanks. Twice a day we tell God that "We are grateful to You . . . for preserving us and keeping us alive" (in *Modim de-Rabbanan*). But in many people's lives there are times when they cannot even mean this in truth. Unjustifiable suffering, suffering that can crush a man's desire to live, is an undeniable part of the human condition. When that happens, how can he say *Modim* and mean it?

I asked these questions without mincing any words, because to state them more gently would be an injustice to them. It is obvious that many people will legitimately sidestep the question, pointing to *bitahon bashem*, trust in God, as the answer. Having faith that whatever God decrees is ultimately good is an honorable approach to the problem, one that is sanctified by tradition, as we mentioned above. But the question remains: How can people say these prayers when their *bitahon* is not strong enough, or when the situation is beyond any possibility of saying that it is ultimately "for the best" (and Jewish history is full of such situations)? Should people still say these words when they are lies?

Let us see what happens when we combine the idea of simple prayer with a "hardheaded" resignation to the problem of theodicy, one which admits that unjustified cruelty and suffering do exist and makes no attempt to minimize them, justify them, or otherwise "explain" them away. I submit that this combination actually leads to the deepest, most heartfelt kind of prayer. This is because all the "explanations" for the problem of evil circumscribe what we can say about God's world, both for good and for evil. But simple prayer and a candid acceptance that unjustified suffering exists can deepen our "human" relationship with God on both sides, and also deepen our prayers.

The problem with the questions we asked about the *Barukh she-Amar* and *Modim* prayers is not that they are false, but that they reflect a moral failing. In any honest and open relationship between two people, things will happen that hurt one party or the other. But there must also be ways in which the relationship is beneficial—otherwise they would abandon it entirely. The "good" in a relationship, its easy and pleasant side, is surely no excuse for its failings. But the opposite is equally true: it is a terrible mistake to criticize a relationship and point out how it is wrong, unless at the same time the party doing the criticizing is fully aware of how it is also right, and expresses the positive side as well. It is a moral failing, in Jewish ethical terms a *midda ra'ah* (bad character trait), to find the darkness and dwell on it completely, but to ignore the light.

The "simple" model of prayer is based on the social analogy, where we talk to God as we would to a just king, a kind master, or a merciful father. In other words, "simple" prayer is modeled on a human relationship. But

just as in a human relationship, it is too easy to become lost in what is wrong and forget about what is right when we think about how God treats us. I am not saying we should *deny* what is wrong, or try to minimize horrible realities in God's world through naive extortations that circumstances are ultimately "for the best." Simple prayer demands that we be candid and honest with God, even when things are terribly wrong. But by the same token, we are unfair to God if we do not also maintain a prominent place in prayer for what is right. Only a person who is fully aware of what is right in a relationship (or at the very least what *was* once right) can criticize what is wrong in it with integrity.

Any honest person must admit that a great deal is terribly wrong with God's world *and* that much is wonderfully right about it. Trying to appraise which side of the coin is "greater" or "stronger" is childish and unproductive, and does nothing more than reveal the current state of mind of the fickle person making the judgement. The fact is that both sides exist, both are real, and both are powerful parts of every person's life. Both sides are also parts of every person's relationship with God.

Only if we admit this can we sincerely praise and thank God when, at the same time, we suffer cruelly. When we say *Barukh she-Amar* there are always numerous ways we can truly mean it in its simple sense, even if we also know of many ways in which it seems completely false. One truth does not cancel out another; just as a time of joy is no "excuse" for a period of suffering, neither does the horror in God's world cancel out its beauty, its wonder, its kindnesses, and its delights. Both sides are true, and both have their place in our prayers. But each side must stay in its proper place. "Praise" is the time we turn to God and express our wonder and incredulity at the power, complexity, beauty, and goodness in the world He made. "Thanks" is when we recognize what He has done for us personally and as a nation, things we have experienced in our own lives. Praise and Thanks always remain entirely true and necessary in their own right, despite whatever legitimate complaints we may have, and they deserve to be emphasized with undiluted love and sincerity. Every truth about our relationship with God must have its place in prayer, and Praise and Thanks are the place set aside to focus on what is right in that relationship. Far from being pious lies, sincere praise and thanks are precisely what give moral weight to our petitions when we focus on what is wrong in God's world. We have no right to plead with God, focusing on the negative, if we do not also appreciate the positive.

Furthermore, praise must precede petition. This is because prayer is modeled not on any human relationship, but on our relationship to an authority figure whom we serve with awe and respect. Prayer is to a king, a master, or a father, not to a peer. Praise establishes the true context of the relationship, putting each party in his place. This fact does not detract from the justice of our cause, nor does it mean that there is never a place for biting recrimination towards God. But it does mean that these must come within the context of a relationship that is not between equals.

This is how I am able to sincerely mean praise and thanks, even when I might not otherwise be inclined to. The idea is simply that praise and

thanks are a time for totally and completely focusing on what is good. Many people, including myself, find it much too easy to dwell on bad things and tell God about them; so praise and thanks are an antidote, motivating us to dwell on what is good and express our appreciation to God. Again, this is only my own approach to praise and thanks, a personal statement. I do not deny that other approaches are equally valid. But for those who accept the principle of "simple" prayer, I think what I have described here works best for coming to grips with the major emotional problem posed by such prayer. What I described above is the only way I can mean what I say when I praise or thank God in prayers that are entirely positive, and not feel that I am lying to myself about things that are negative and completely wrong. I hope that others can benefit from this approach as well.

But what about petition? What do we say to God when things are horribly wrong? I submit that human relationships can teach us something important about petition as well. Any casual look at biblical and rabbinic prayers will show that they are almost never temperamental ravings or resentful complaints. They are saved from this by the fact that "simple" petition based on the social analogy has a "motivation," whether implied or explicit. As Moshe Greenberg put it, motivation is designed to show a "coincidence of interests" between ourselves and God. It is designed to deepen the relationship through the need, not shatter it. The painful aspects of a human relationship must be expressed, never denied. But including a "motivation" means they are expressed as part of that relationship, not as hostile recriminations meant to sever what binds the two parties together. Whatever pain exists must be talked about on the basis of attitudes that both parties share.

Similarly prayer to God, even its "negative" side, is expressed through shared interests and attitudes when it is based on the social analogy. This does not mean that what we say to God does not border on being accusatory at times, or even biting. But what we say must remain within the context of what links us to God, and must not cut that link. Furthermore, it must be said after expressing that much of our relationship to Him is based on things that are wonderful and good. Petition must follow Praise, as we said before.

Based on this, "simple" prayer using the social analogy can provide a model for how to petition God and what to ask Him for. The model can be abused, as in Albo's example of a man who asks God to make him king of the world like Alexander the Great. Albo declared such a petition illegitimate for a different reason (because God probably has a better candidate for the job). But according to the social analogy it is wrong because the man who asks to be king shows God no more maturity, nor depth of need, nor interests and concerns that he shares with God, than does a selfish child who begs his father for every toy in the toy store. In other words, the prayer to be king of the world lacks a sincere, convincing motivation. It is not persuasive on a human level, so why should it persuade God? It is only a sincere, mature, and persuasive motivation that prevents "simple" prayer from degenerating into childish nagging. When the "motivation" fails, prayer based on the social analogy fails as well.



Thus, Albo's example fails not only for rational prayer, as he showed, but for "simple" prayer as well. But when the social analogy for prayer is applied effectively, with a powerful "motivation," it can be applied with success, and also serve us as a guide to what we should ask God for and how to ask Him for it. There is no better way to show how this is done than with an example.

Hazal were fully aware of the unjustifiable suffering in the world. The most famous and oft-quoted example of a rabbinic prayer reflecting that awareness is undoubtedly the elaboration on Hannah's biblical prayer for a son which Rabbi Elazar quoted in the Talmud (*Berakhot* 31b–32a):

Master of the Universe! Whatever You have created in a woman, not one thing is purposeless: Eyes are to see, ears are to hear, the nose is to smell, the mouth is to speak, hands are to work with, legs are to walk with, and breasts are to feed with. Why have You put these breasts upon my chest? Are they not to feed with? Give me a son so that I may feed with them!

Hannah does not hide her bitter pain or her disappointment in this prayer. But neither does she sever her relationship with God. Indeed, the most striking thing about this prayer is Hannah's motivation, which only strengthens her connection to God while not minimizing her disappointment with what He has done so far. The "motivation" in her prayer is the simple fact that God is her Creator, who made her a woman. This fact allows her, with complete justice, to call upon God to let her fulfil her womanhood. To use the terminology of the social analogy freely and without metaphysical inhibitions, this is how she "persuades" God, how she motivates Him. Her motivation is effective because it rests on, and even strengthens, the undeniable connection between the Creator and His creation, Hannah. She simply asks Him to let her fulfil the purpose for which He created her. This motivation is what gives Hannah's prayer its power, truth, and validity.

Based on a biblical verse, Rabbi Elazar said that Hannah "cast words towards Heaven," i.e., she spoke to God with an attitude of recrimination. Indeed, this attitude is obvious from the words that Rabbi Elazar put into her mouth: "Master of the Universe! After all the multitudes that You created, would it be so hard for You to give me one son?" And this recriminatory prayer is based directly on the social analogy, as Rabbi Elazar continued to explain: "To what can this be compared? To a king of flesh and blood who made a feast for his servants. A poor man came and sat by the doorway. He said to them: 'Give me a piece of bread,' but they ignored him. He pushed his way in and over to the king, and said to him, 'My master the king! After this whole feast that you made, would it be hard for you to give me one piece of bread?'"

But Rabbi Elazar did not criticize Hannah's speaking harshly before God, as one act towards a human king. Instead, he continued by showing that Elijah and Moses did the very same thing. Elijah accused God: "You turned their hearts backward!" (1 Kings 18:37). And Moses said, "Master of the Universe! Because of the gold and silver that you rained on Israel until they

said 'Enough!'—that is why they made the Golden Calf!"<sup>3</sup> The same basic "motivation" runs through the prayers of Hannah, Elijah, and Moses as they are elaborated in the Talmud: they persuade God to answer them by simply asking Him to be fair. But of all three prayers, Hannah's is clearly the most powerful, the most heartfelt, the most inspired and inspiring. Why? The answer clearly lies in a deeper level in her motivation that is not shared by the others, when she calls upon God to let her fulfil what He created her for. Hannah draws upon her relationship to God (as His creation) in order to motivate Him.

For "simple" prayer this basic attitude, this "motivation" for God, is the best basis for honest petition when people truly suffer. When used sincerely, it also provides the best guide for what it is right to pray for and what it is not. Unlike Rabbi Yosef Albo, simple prayer does not avoid asking God for anything specific; the best prayer does not simply ask God to "do what is right in Your eyes." Unlike some rationalistic interpretations of prayer, it does not only ask for spiritual things, or for just the most basic and general material needs. God created us, and on this basis alone there are circumstances in which we, as His creations, have the right to ask Him for specific kinds of help. But how can we know what is appropriate to ask Him for and what is not? I agree that knowing where to draw the line—deciding what constitutes a shallow whim and what is an existential necessity—can be very perplexing, but the answer depends a lot more on emotional maturity and *menschllichkeit* than it does on disinterested prescriptions found in written essays on how to pray. A person simply has to be honest with himself and God about what he really needs, about what a creation has the right to ask his Creator for, just as he must be honest and sincere when he pleads with a human authority who is both fair and kind. In "simple" prayer, the ultimate test of whether a petition is justified is whether or not its "motivation" is moving and persuasive. If the "motivation" has power, if another human being would be moved by it, then it is likely that the petition is justified and right to ask God for.

But the simple model of petition can be abused even when a person asks God for the right things. Rabbi Shalom Carmy has pointed out that even a barren woman (whose prayer, unlike Hannah's, is not answered) may find that "her life is increasingly poisoned by her bitter and failed obsession" if she never gives up her quest when she doesn't have a child.<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Carmy is correct that obsessive concern for any need, even an entirely legitimate one, can be religiously debilitating. This is because expressing a certain legitimate need to God must remain part of an overall relationship, and not entirely dominate that relationship forever. But unlike Rabbi Carmy, I don't think the purpose of prayer is to give us a "self-understanding" about our "true table of needs," that in the experience of prayer God will somehow "tell" us when to drop a plea, even an entirely legitimate one, entirely.<sup>5</sup> To

3. This is a midrashic interpretation of Deuteronomy 1:1.

4. Carmy, p. 22.

5. Ibid., pp. 23, 33.

me it is clear that a woman who, unlike Hannah, never has a baby, has every right to bring this up with God for the rest of her life. As long as she continues to have a positive overall relationship with God, appreciating His other blessings despite her lack of a child, and serving Him in other worthwhile ways, there is no reason she should not continue to raise her true complaint to God, and even be somewhat resentful about it. But she also has to be a *mentsch* who knows how to express her pain within the context of a total relationship with God, and to continue loving and serving Him despite it. To lie and deny her pain, to hide it when she supposedly discovers (or God reveals to her) a new "table of needs" as Rabbi Carmy describes, would damage her honest relationship with God more than to continue expressing it.

The petitions in the *Amida* surely do not reflect the biting tone of the remarks that Rabbi Elazar put into Hannah's mouth; they do not constitute "casting words towards Heaven." But similar assumptions lie behind them. Whether we ask God for knowledge, forgiveness, health, prosperity, or national restoration in the *Amida*, the plea to God is based on two assumptions: (1) God is *capable* of doing these things (as in "Blessed are You . . . who heals all flesh"); (2) God Himself *desires* to do these things ("because You are the God and King who devotedly and mercifully heals"). The second factor, that God wants to do the things we ask Him for, usually derives from explicit passages in the Torah or the prophets. Both factors are present in many petitions of the *Amida*.

The same two factors are explicit in Hannah's rhetorical questions. First, God is capable of giving her a baby because He is all-powerful: "Would it be so hard for You to give me one son?" Second, the very fact that He created her in a certain way shows that He intended certain things for her: "Why have You put these breasts upon my chest? Are they not to feed with?" Nevertheless, I am sure the reader has a "gut feeling" that there is something that makes the *Amida's* tone quite different than Hannah's. The difference in tone between Hannah's plea and the petitions of the *Amida* results, I believe, from the simple fact that Hannah's prayer is for something God consistently denied her for years. When a person has prayed for so long but God has not answered her (as with Hannah) is when "casting words towards Heaven" is called for. When it seems that God has coldly rejected a legitimate and justified plea, biting words become understandable. But the petitions in the *Amida* are usually for the continuation of blessings that already exist, or are at least not entirely absent: most Jews are usually healthy, and most Jews are normally not starving. So in the *Amida* we ask God to continue granting us health and prosperity, and plead with Him not to allow any catastrophe that would end these blessings. We might imagine that when the words of the blessings were not entirely fixed, as we will describe in the next chapter, then even the *Amida* may have been phrased in "biting" ways more like Hannah's prayer during times of extreme communal suffering. (From the way Rabbi Elazar put prayers into Hannah's mouth, we may gain a small insight into what he said to God in his own prayers!) In any case, the stinging tone of Hannah's prayer and the mild phraseology of the *Amida* are both understandable according to the social

analogy. They are appropriate in different situations, but both have their place in "simple" Jewish prayer.

When the right given to us by the social analogy to plead with God is used wisely and sincerely, when what we ask for is justified and how we ask for it (the motivation) is convincing and persuasive, is when the most meaningful Jewish prayers are uttered. Such prayer deepens our connection to God without ignoring or rationalizing how God treats us. This and nothing else is the reason for the heartrending power of *The Kaddish of Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev*. All Jews should be familiar with this incredible prayer, which Rabbi Levi Yitzhak broke from the traditional liturgy on Rosh Hashana to say in Yiddish:

Good morning to You, Lord, Master of the Universe.  
I, Levi Yitzhak, son of Sarah of Berditchev,  
I come to You with a Din Torah from Your people Israel.

What do You want of Your people Israel?  
What have You demanded of Your people Israel?  
For everywhere I look it says, "Say to the children of Israel,"  
And every other verse says, "Speak to the Children of Israel,"  
And over and over, "Command the Children of Israel."

Father, sweet Father in Heaven,  
How many nations are there in the world?  
Persians, Babylonians, Edomites.

The Russians, what do they say?  
That their Czar is the only ruler.  
The Prussians, what do they say?  
That their Kaiser is supreme.  
And the English, what do they say?  
That George the Third is the sovereign.

And I, Levi Yitzhak, son of Sarah of Berditchev, say,  
"*Yisgadal v'yiskadash shmei raboh*—  
Magnified and sanctified is Thy Name."

And I, Levi Yitzhak, son of Sarah of Berditchev, say,  
"*Lo ozuz mimkomee*; From my stand I will not waver,  
And from my place I shall not move  
Until there be an end to all this.  
*Yisgadal v'yiskadash shmei raboh*—  
Magnified and sanctified is only Thy Name."<sup>6</sup>

6. Samuel H. Dresner, *The World of a Hasidic Master: Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1994), p. 86.

This prayer is extraordinarily moving when it is sung in Yiddish, and as a Yiddish song it captured the souls of east-European Jews. Some of its power even comes through in the English translation on paper. No rationalistic prayer, no prayer of "self-training" or "self-discovery," could ever have this kind of force and depth of meaning. The "motivation" meant to persuade God in Rabbi Levi Yitzhak's prayer is the strongest of any prayer ever uttered. The plea is all the more emphatic for remaining unstated ("until there be an end to all this" is the closest it comes). In truth, what underlies this prayer is no different than what underlies Hannah's prayer, a demand that God deal fairly with His creatures. But Rabbi Levi Yitzhak magnified her complaint for God's entire nation throughout their long and bitter exile, adding that *they* have been faithful to *Him*. No longer is it just one child that God has denied to a loyal maidservant, but a life of dignity and joy to an entire nation of loyal servants through two thousand years of suffering. The famous story of the very same Rabbi Levi Yitzhak calling God to trial (!) for not fulfilling his responsibilities to an individual Jew, though not in the form of a prayer, is no less based on the social analogy.

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak loved the Jewish people as much as he loved God, and this caused a conflict because of the extreme suffering of the Jews and God's seeming indifference. His prayer, in a way, begs God to end his internal conflict by alleviating the suffering. If he did not love God intensely ("Father, sweet Father in heaven"), then his Kaddish would have no "motivation," no reason why God should heed it. But if his love of God had "quieted" his need to express human suffering during prayer, as for other early hasidic *rebbe*s, then he could never have uttered his Kaddish at all. The hallmark of this "simple" prayer is ardent love of God and loyalty to his Torah, combined with an equally passionate desire to satisfy legitimate human needs. I doubt that anyone today could match his prayer, partially because he himself was so unique and partially because we today (Thank You, God!) live in a time when most Jews do not suffer so terribly, though they did just a short time ago. But Rabbi Levi Yitzhak, like Hannah, showed us the ingredients of "simple" yet meaningful prayer: Do not forget your love for God and commitment to His Torah; remember all that He has done for you; but at the same time emphasize the validity and importance of what you ask Him for. Tell Him all of this; tell Him why He should want to answer the prayer just as much as you want Him to, and you will succeed in praying sincerely as Jews have done since Abraham. This is how to pray the "simple" way.



### ❖ III ❖

## Kavvana *and the Siddur*





## *Prayer as a Fixed Text*

### INTRODUCTION

I once spent several Shabbatot in Israel visiting a small *moshav*, a farming community, that was founded and settled by immigrants from Yemen. I wanted to learn about their unique traditions very much, and so one Shabbat during the tefillot I began to look around for a siddur with the Yemenite *nosah* (text), called the *Tiklal* in Arabic. I was dismayed when I realized that most of the siddurim in that synagogue were the common Sephardic *nosah*, not the version of the Yemenites. After all, the Yemenite Jews had preserved their unique textual traditions with meticulous care for many centuries, and I thought it was a great pity that they were beginning to abandon them in Israel. Besides that, it was impossible to follow the tefillot from the Sephardic siddur, which prescribed very different customs.

One middle-aged man saw me looking around, and handed me another Sephardic siddur. When I told him in Hebrew, "No, I'm looking for the *Tiklal*," he simply responded, "*Mah ikhpat lekha? Elu ve-elu divrei Elohim Hayyim!* [What difference does it make? Both of them are the words of the Living God!]"

This man may not have realized it, but it is likely that his attitude towards choosing a siddur is much closer to the feelings of Hazal about the text of the tefillot than my own or that of most observant Jews today, who tend to be very particular about which version of the siddur we use! It still bothers me that many Jews of Yemenite origin are forgetting their traditions. But as we shall soon see, the issue of "which siddur to use" is really not central to the *halakhot* of prayer, nor are the exact words of the prayers themselves.

This chapter and the next will discuss whether Jewish prayer is really supposed to involve reciting predetermined words from the siddur. Answering this question will require us to examine a number of disparate views about the early history of Jewish prayer. It is only fair to warn readers that while the overall topic is extremely fascinating, its details are sometimes complicated or elusive. But everything possible has been done to help make this often difficult topic both lucid and engrossing; important ideas that had previously been discussed only in scholarly articles and books will

be presented clearly and made accessible to all intelligent readers. But do not be surprised if you occasionally have to read an argument more than once or refer back to something you read earlier. A full understanding of this intricate and captivating issue will be fully worth the extra effort that it will occasionally entail.

## AN "OFFICIAL TEXT" OF THE PRAYERS: THE PROBLEM

No statement recorded in rabbinic literature explicitly says that Hazal composed an exact text for the tefillot. Those that do speak about establishing prayers invariably use terms like *tikken(u)* ("instituted") or *hisdir* ("arranged"), which may imply nothing more than deciding on an overall format for prayer. For instance: "One hundred and twenty elders, among them several prophets, instituted the eighteen blessings in order [*tikkenu* . . . 'al ha-seder]" (*Megilla* 18a). Or: "The Men of the Great Assembly instituted [*tikkenu*] blessings and prayers . . . for Israel" (*Berakhot* 33a). Also consider: "Shimon ha-Pakuli arranged [*hisdir*] eighteen blessings before Rabban Gamliel in order at Yavneh" (*Berakhot* 28b).<sup>1</sup> No "official" text of the Amida is recorded as having been promoted by Hazal. And it is very unlikely that

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1. For other examples see Heinemann, *Ha-Tefilla bi-Tekufat ha-Tannai'm v'ha-Amoraim: Tivah u-Defuseha* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984), p. 17. This important work appeared in English under the title *Prayer in the Talmud: Forms and Patterns* (New York: de Gruyter, 1977). My references will be to the Hebrew original.

The last example mentioned the "order" of the eighteen blessings. Why the blessings are in the particular order that we find them, and why there are eighteen (or nineteen) of them, is not directly relevant to our discussion of rote versus meaning; we will focus on the individual texts of the eighteen blessings and the permissibility of self-expression in them, but not on their order. Those who want to explore the issue of their order should investigate the theory that it, like much their wording, is strongly rooted in various biblical passages; see *Megilla* 17b–18a, and also the fascinating passage quoted from *Shibbolei ha-Leket* in *Beit Yosef* to *Tur* 113 (along with the important clarification offered there by the *Perishah*). Also see *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 27–50 (cited in *Arukh ha-Shulhan Orach Hayyim* 112:2). Logical thematic connections are offered for the sequence of the blessings in *Yerushalmi Berakhot* 2:4. Both scriptural sources and "logical-sequential" reasons for the choice and order of themes in the Amida are offered by Saadya Gaon in his introduction to his *Siddur* (pp. 2–5). Saadya gives a biblical example of prayer for each of the petitions in the Amida, thus showing that praying for all of them falls under the biblical category of *tefilla*.

Ezra Fleischer recently suggested that the first six petitions are for the needs of Israel before their final redemption, while the last six are their eschatological needs and wishes for the messianic era. (This doesn't include the petition against the heretics, of course.) See "The *Shemone Esrei*—its Character, Internal Order, Content and Goals," *Tarbiz* 62, no. 2 (1993): 195–202. It should be noted that this highly attractive theory is one of many examples of excellent points by Fleischer that are not at all dependent on his premise that the Amida was composed word for word as an unchanging "official" text. On this, see chapter ten.

the rabbis<sup>2</sup> actually transcribed prayer texts, since prayer was considered part of the Oral Law that was forbidden to be written.

To conclude from this alone, however, that the rabbis did not compose the prayers word for word would be to argue solely from silence; perhaps it was considered obvious that men who "instituted" prayers also formulated their words. Clearly, the problem cannot be solved based on this evidence alone. In fact, the question of whether Hazal ever composed an "original text" of the prayers was debated in scholarly circles during the early twentieth century. We will survey that debate now to introduce the topic. Afterwards, most of this chapter will be devoted to examining the thoughts of rabbis and *posekim* after the time of the *gemara* thought on the issue, and the implications of their views for ourselves. As we study the opinions of rabbinic authorities on this question it will become obvious that their debate parallels the discussions that took place in academic circles more recently, but also that the rabbinic debate was far more colorful and rich in its ideas.

## THE DEBATE AMONG MODERN SCHOLARS

In the 1920s, Louis Finkelstein of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America advocated the theory that all extant versions of the *Amida* derive from one original text. So confident was he of the correctness of his theory that he even "reconstructed" what he considered to be the original text, in which each blessing consisted of exactly seven words!<sup>3</sup> As we shall see in this chapter, Finkelstein's opinion seems to be at odds with a number of talmudic sources suggesting that there was never any such thing as an "original" text. Furthermore, as we shall see, his approach forces the *gemara*'s four definitions of *keva* (which we discussed at length in chapter one) to be rejected as historically untrue.

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2. In this chapter I will sometimes use "the rabbis" interchangeably with "Hazal" to refer to authorities of talmudic times.

3. *Jewish Quarterly Review*, new series vol. 16 (1925–1926): 1–43. Finkelstein attempted to achieve what he regarded as the important task of recovering the texts of the eighteen blessings as they were originally composed and determining their dates of composition. This could be accomplished, he wrote, by gathering the various versions and comparing them. In the Appendix to his article (*ibid.*, 127–170) Finkelstein did just that, gathering all extant versions of the *Shemoneh Esrei* and presenting them in parallel columns.

His "seven-words" theory for the blessings of the *Amida* appears on pp. 11–13. Finkelstein wrote that the generation following Hillel was "a period in which attention was paid to the number of words in the prayers, and in which a mystic power was attached to the number seven" (p. 12).

Later, in *JQR*, n.s. 19 (1928–1929): 211–262, Finkelstein applied the same methodology towards "fixing the original texts and the dates of the four benedictions of the *Birkat Ha-Mazon*" (p. 211). He wrote that "there can be no doubt regarding the importance" of this task. However, we shall see that considerable doubt remains about the underlying assumptions guiding such a venture.

On the other hand, Joseph Heinemann of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (this century's most renowned expert on Jewish liturgy, and himself a deeply religious Orthodox Jew) devoted his major research to reconstructing the early history of Jewish prayer based on the assumption that originally it was very fluid. Heinemann's predecessor and the father of academic scholarship on Jewish liturgy, Ismar Elbogen (1874–1943), had already argued convincingly for this position,<sup>4</sup> and Heinemann culled further convincing evidence for it in the course of his studies.<sup>5</sup> The same opinion had already been stated in the previous century by Rabbi Samuel David Luzzato (1800–1865, an important Italian Jewish scholar known by his acronym "Shadal"):

Our predecessors of blessed memory set the format of blessings for us to thank God and pray to Him. But they did not mean by their decree that the text of our prayers should be entirely fixed like a nail which cannot be moved, that one may not add [to prayer] nor subtract from it!

Rather, their decree was in order to set the matters about which we must thank God and pray to Him for all of Israel, and to fix the general order of blessings. . . . This was so that the major part of prayer and the theme of each blessing and their openings and closings would be the same for all of Israel in all the places where they reside.

But our predecessors of blessed memory never wrote the blessings and prayers in a book. . . . Instead, they let each individual or *sheli'ah tzibbur* lengthen or shorten them according to his understanding. That is why they instituted the silent *Shemoneh Esrei* so that the *sheli'ah tzibbur* could rehearse his prayer to himself before reciting it for the congregation.

And Rabbi Eliezer said, "One who makes his prayer *keva*—his prayer is not *tahanunim*" (*Berakhot* 4:4), while his colleague Rabbi

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4. On the composition of the *tefilla*, see Yitzhak Moshe Elbogen, *Ha-Tefilla Be-Yisrael be-Hitpathutah ha-Historit*, (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1972), pp. 20–31. This is a Hebrew translation of Ismar Elbogen, *Der juedische Gottesdienst in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung* (Frankfurt am Main, 1931). Joseph Heinemann edited the Hebrew edition, and included essays summarizing the conclusions of scholarship since Elbogen's time. A recent English translation of the work is based both on Heinemann's Hebrew edition and the German original. See Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*, trans. Raymond P. Scheindlin (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993). My references will be to the Hebrew edition unless otherwise noted.

Elbogen responded to Finkelstein's article in an addendum to the German edition of his book (p. 583). This was later incorporated into the body of the Hebrew edition (p. 388, n. 1).

5. Appendix to Heinemann, *Ha-Tefilla*, chap. 2: "Birkat Boneh Yerushalayim: Hashva'at Nosahim"; also see Heinemann's wonderful article on how to teach this topic to middle school or high school students in *Ma'ayanot 8: Tefillah*, ed. Hayyim Hamiel (Jerusalem: Torah Education Department of the World Zionist Organization, 1952).

Shimon ben Netanel often said: "Don't make your prayer *keva*, instead make it *rahamim* and *tahanunim* before God" (*Avot* 2:13). The meaning of *keva* is that one prays with fixed words and says nothing new, as Rabba and Rav Yosef explained (*Berakhot* 29b). And Rashi said that the term *keva* means "Just like today—it was the same yesterday and it will be the same tomorrow!"<sup>6</sup>

Through Heinemann's excellent work on the topic, this eventually became the dominant view in academic circles. It has remained so since Heinemann published his major work in 1964. In the early 1990s one scholar, Ezra Fleischer of the Hebrew University, published an important essay which brought Heinemann's thesis back into question and advocated a return to Finkelstein's view that Hazal's prayers and blessings were originally instituted to be recited as fixed texts. We will return to this attack on Heinemann's position later in chapter ten, and show that Fleischer's arguments are not compelling. For now, we will simply treat Heinemann's position as the prevailing opinion among academic Jewish scholars.

Heinemann's most important work was his form-critical analysis of the written corpus of rabbinic prayer. He first classified prayers by their form, i.e., by grouping together prayers which share similar textual characteristics. Then he suggested the origin for prayers in each "class": those that originated in the early synagogues of Second Temple times, those that are derived from the services in the Temple itself, those that came from the *beit ha-midrash* (the study hall of scholars), and those that began as the private prayers of individuals. He assumes that most rabbinic prayers took shape over a long period of time with no one exact wording ever having been considered the "right" one to the exclusion of others. But in that case, how did a person know what to say? Heinemann describes how blessings were first recited thus:

In early times the person who prayed was not obligated to use a certain *nosah*—fixed word for word—of a blessing, but on the spot he would "compose" such a *nosah* for himself as he said it, or—when he wasn't able to do this—he used one of the popular *nosahim*, which he learned from others. But even that very *mitpallel* wouldn't repeat this same *nosah* time after time, but would change it, lengthen it or shorten it, consciously or without realizing it, according to his needs

6. Introduction to his edition of the Italian version of the siddur "Mavo le-Mahzor Benei Roma," in *Mahzor Kol ha-Shana kefi Minhag Italiani* (Livorno, 1858 [reprinted in a critical edition by Daniel Goldshmidt, Tel Aviv: Devir, 1966]).

Shadal continued by citing some well-known talmudic texts (*Berakhot* 33b) that rule that certain phrases or ideas must not be used in prayer. He asked, "If the text was absolutely fixed, then how could anyone have imagined that someone would use these phrases, which were not part of our traditional text?" Finally, Shadal pointed out that many prayers found in the Talmud are significantly different from our own in their phraseology, and this further erodes the supposition that the rabbis of the Talmud mandated an exact text.

and the amount of free time that he had. Of course, as time went on, certain phrases became widely accepted by most *mitpallelim*, as well as mentioning various details and matters (beyond the main topic of the blessing). At this stage the halakhic scholars made mentioning these phrases and other matters an obligation. Each *mitpallel* was still able to use, for the main body of the blessing, the *nosah* that he preferred, or which he was used to, as long as he "mentioned in it" those details and phrases, which had meanwhile become the accepted custom. . . . For instance: "One who reads *Shema* in the morning must mention the exodus from Egypt in 'Emet ve-Yatziv'. . . ." (*Yerushalmi Berakhot* 1:3).<sup>7</sup>

Chapter two of Heinemann's *Prayer in the Talmud: Forms and Patterns* provides further examples and proofs, and also a description of how these texts were further "hardened" during the times of the later Amoraim. Since Heinemann discussed this matter thoroughly there, adding to Elbogen's already convincing description, the position needn't be proven here again. However, we will look at a few colorful texts that illustrate how contemporary Jews, who are only familiar with the fixed texts of the siddur, unconsciously reinterpret midrashic and talmudic passages in accordance with their own experience. The first is a witty talmudic anecdote:

Once a student led the prayers before Rabbi Eliezer, and his blessings were short. His students said to him: Rabbi, did you see how so-and-so shortened his blessings? And they mocked him, saying: This man is a scholar who is short [in his prayers]! He said to them: He wasn't any shorter than Moses, who simply said "God, please heal her!" (*Numbers* 12:13).

Another student once led the prayers before Rabbi Eliezer, and his blessings were lengthy. His students said to him: Rabbi, did you see how this fellow lengthens his blessings? And they called him a "lengthy one." He said to them: He didn't take any longer than Moses, as it says, "And I fell before God like the first time, for forty days and forty nights" (*Deuteronomy* 9:18).<sup>8</sup>

Contemporary Jews who hear the second half of this story (about the lengthy student) cannot help but conjure up images of a classical *hazzan* who was able to make a single paragraph in the siddur last five minutes or more by singing each word unbearably slowly, and sometimes by continuously repeating words, phrases, or the entire paragraph. On the other hand, the first part (about the quick student) is suggestive of what a typical *sheli'ah tzibbur* (prayer leader) often does on weekdays: it is common for him to race through the entire repetition of the *Amida* in less than three minutes (about ten seconds per blessing!) by slurring the words together, hardly even stopping to take a breath.

7. Heinemann, *Ha-Tefilla*, pp. 36–37.

8. *Mekhila Beshalakh* 1 on Exodus 15:25; *Berakhot* 34a.

However, if Heinemann is correct then none of these images relate to what the story really meant. It is more likely that the two students who were described as "short" or "lengthy" in their prayers were using words of their own choosing. One was rather elaborate, while the other didn't see the need to present his prayers to God in so many words. Contemporary Jews, however, resist picturing the story in such terms.

A second example is a simple statement from the Talmud: "From a person's blessings it becomes evident whether he is a scholar or an ignoramus" (*Berakhot* 50a). In its modern conception, this would mean that a person leading the prayers must be something of a scholar if he pronounces the words correctly and takes care to accent the correct syllables, or to distinguish small details of pronunciation such as the "*sheva na*." Furthermore, a person who reads the prayers in the correct tone of voice, so that it is evident to listeners that he understands what he is saying, or one who shows his awareness of sentence structure by pausing at the proper places, is evidently something of a learned man. But again, this may not at all be what the talmudic statement actually meant. Based on the examples following it in the Talmud, its true point seems to have been that if a man can compose eloquent prayers on the spot in his own words then he must be something of a scholar, while someone who cannot express himself correctly and well is obviously not a learned man.

Finally, the meaning of one more passage becomes clearer based on Heinemann's theory (though he himself did not quote it in this context): "Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai: Why did they decree that prayer must be silent? So as not to embarrass those who have sinned" (*Sota* 32b). Heinemann would probably explain that prayer had to be quiet so that an individual wouldn't be inhibited from confessing his private sins in his own words during the *Amida* (presumably during the blessing nowadays called *selah lanu*).

These examples should suffice to clarify Heinemann's position, a view on the origins of the prayers that comes as somewhat of a shock to Jews who are used to thinking that prayer must involve reciting a specific text from a book. But Jewish prayer has not always been repeated recitation of the exact same words each time a person prayed. In fact, the three major versions of the siddur that are used today—those of the Yemenites, the Sephardim, and the Ashkenazim—all derive from the very first *siddurim* compiled by the Babylonian *geonim* in the tenth and eleventh centuries. The *geonim* continued the process of "fixing" the correct texts for prayer, but even they did not consider the blessings to be rigidly worded as we find them today. Saadya Gaon, for instance, was willing to accept any wording as valid, provided that it conformed with the general theme of the particular blessing.<sup>9</sup> In any case, Heinemann posits that Hazal would have found the idea of an "official" *nosah* of the tefillot to be a strange idea.

9. On Saadya Gaon's views about the "correct" text, first see Yosef Heinemann, "Yahaso shel Rav Saadya Gaon le-Shinui Matbea' ha-Tefilla, "reprinted in *Iyyunei Tefilla* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1981), pp. 110–123.

Then consult Lawrence Hoffman's *The Canonization of the Synagogue Service*

Now let us examine an implication of the debate between Heinemann and Finkelstein by restudying the mishnaic statement of Rabbi Eliezer on

(South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), which is a complete survey of geonic attempts to fix the "correct" texts and customs for prayer. Hoffman begins to chart the process of standardization where Heinemann left off, and finds the roots of the historical process which led to a standardized prayer text (a "siddur") becoming synonymous with Jewish prayer. However, despite the fact that many *geonim* did promote official "siddurim," none of them rejected minor variations in the words in principle. And none of their prayer texts became widely accepted as binding during their own times.

Hoffman shows that specific *geonim* were either relatively tolerant or intolerant regarding variations in prayer customs, depending on the pressures they confronted. Earlier *geonim* were engaged in a struggle to impose their authority, their Talmud, and their customs on Jewish communities everywhere. Thus, they were intolerant towards competing customs from the Land of Israel and tried to stamp them out. Others had different concerns; a later gaon like Saadya was more interested in showing how rabbinic customs were logical and internally consistent, and his "fixing" of the siddur reflects that concern. According to Hoffman, Saadya's "defense of the rationality of the rabbinic rite" and his program to "trace the prayers to their biblical foundations" were probably connected to his struggle against the Karaites (pp. 165–166). But the very latest *geonim*, represented by Sherira and Hai (968–1038), seem to have had fewer polemical concerns, and thus their acceptance of variation in prayer customs was "extraordinary" (p. 167).

Ultimately, concludes Hoffman, the *geonim* were unsuccessful in standardizing the prayer-texts of their time, but their efforts swayed Jews in that direction during the following centuries:

From the evidence of the geonic literature alone, it would seem that no great success was encountered by the *geonim*. It is fair to say, at least, that where success was attained, it was a result of the will of later communities themselves, not the authoritarian aspect of the gaonate. Whatever authority the *geonim* had for later generations, there is very little evidence, indeed, that the geonic will was venerated abroad during their lifetimes. Later ages may have viewed the *geonim* as they themselves had viewed the amoraim, and only then were their mandates revived and respected, discussed ad infinitum, and acted upon one way or the other. But as for the geonic years themselves, the amount of variation [in prayer] faced by Yehudai seems in no way diminished by the time of Hai's death.

But the synagogue service was canonized, and in a sense by the *geonim*, particularly Amram, whose *Seder* became common currency in western Europe, citing, as it did, relevant *Babli* instructions for new communities hungry for roots in traditional sources. As Jews in Spain, Italy, Germany, and France accepted the Babylonian Talmud as their chief source of authority, and their primary legal text to study and act upon, so they were drawn to Amram's *Seder*. But the opinions of other *geonim* were considered too, as was Palestinian practice to the extent it was known.

It would, therefore, be truer to conclude that the *geonim* laid the groundwork for liturgical canonization, which then reached fruition in the several rites of the various Jewish communities that matured only after the geonic age had ceased. To a great extent ignored in their own time, the *geonim*



prayer that is *keva*, an important source that we already read in chapter one. (The discussion will be based on Heinemann's work.)<sup>10</sup> This time we will study the statement in the context of the preceding mishna:

(Mishna 3) Rabban Gamliel says: Every day a person must pray eighteen [blessings]. Rabbi Yehoshua says: A summary of the eighteen blessings. Rabbi Akiva says: If he knows his prayer fluently, he must pray eighteen, but if not—then a summary of eighteen.

(Mishna 4) Rabbi Eliezer says: One who makes his prayer *keva*—his prayer is not *tahanunim*.

Those who identify with Finkelstein's school of thought, supposing that initially there was an "official text" of the *Amida*, read Mishna 4 in light of Mishna 3. They argue that in Mishna 4 Rabbi Eliezer completely rejected all three of the opinions in the preceding Mishna, because he was an absolute opponent of the fixed prayer-texts. According to Rabbi Eliezer, a person shouldn't recite any "official" text of the eighteen blessings at all, nor should he recite a summary thereof. Instead, he should use his own words, since fixed prayer tends to become a meaningless habit rather than a profound encounter with God.

This interpretation of Rabbi Eliezer must reject some definitions of *keva* suggested in the gemara that we studied in chapter one. According to the gemara, Rabbi Eliezer had no qualms about the number of blessings, but warns against reciting them in a rote fashion or treating them as a burdensome chore. But Louis Ginzburg, who was Finkelstein's colleague at the Jewish Theological Seminary and shared his view that there was an "official" text, concluded that Rabbi Eliezer opposed *all* fixed prayer texts. According to Ginzburg,<sup>11</sup> Rabbi Eliezer's total rejection of any "official" text was too radical a concept for the rabbis of the gemara. So instead of accepting his statement at face value, they chose to "soften" Rabbi Eliezer's opposition to prescribed prayer by saying that he was only opposed to an attitude treating it habitually. It is interesting that this interpretation of Rabbi Eliezer, which sees him as opposed to all fixed wording and goes against the thrust of the gemara's interpretation, was already formulated in the sixteenth century by Rabbi Yosef Ashkenazi. His position is quoted in the standard commentary *Meleket Shelomo*:

Rabbi Yosef Ashkenazi wrote that Rabbi Eliezer's comment refers back to the previous mishna. He argues with all of them [Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Yehoshua, and Rabbi Akiva], and says that one must

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were to achieve a posthumous victory, as their successors in Europe later decided to adopt their Talmud, to accept their authority, and to worship with their version of a canonized synagogue service. (pp. 170–171)

10. This discussion is based on "Le-Berur Peshutan shel Mishnayot Ahadot" (Part A), in Heinemann, *ibid.*, pp. 77–79.

11. Ginzburg, *Hiddushim u-Vi'urim Birushalmi* (New York: JTS, 1941), pp. 333–337.

not fix prayer at all. Whether one prays the eighteen blessings or a summary of them, "one who makes his prayers *keva*—his prayer is not *tahanunim*!"

However, if one does not assume there was a fixed *nosah* during the era of the *tannaim*, he will be able to interpret the mishna quite differently than Finkelstein or Ginzburg. According to Heinemann, neither Rabban Gamliel nor Rabbi Yehoshua ever supposed that there was one exact text when they mandated eighteen blessings or a summary of them. Hence, Rabbi Eliezer was simply clarifying their position, not rejecting it.<sup>12</sup> When he said that prayer should not be *keva* he was not disagreeing about *whether* fixed prayers should be said, but clarifying *how* any halakhic prayer should be said. Rabbi Eliezer's point is that one should not create a single text to repeat habitually, and also that the recitation of prayer should be viewed as a meaningful encounter with God rather than as a routine "burden" that one would rather push off until later. Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua would have agreed with him, as the gemara assumes they do. According to Heinemann, the gemara's explanations stand on firm ground.

### BASIS OF THE RABBINIC DEBATE

As far as I am aware, no one interested in the question of whether Hazal composed an "original *nosah*" for each blessing has ever surveyed the medieval and pre-modern rabbinic views on the issue. Considering the huge volume of literature that has been spawned by this debate, it is surprising that an examination of how the controversy fared in the traditional halakhic sources has never been dealt with seriously. Instead, modern scholars—those who believe an original text existed along with those who deny it—seem to share the unverified assumption that inflexible prayer texts were a "given" part of halakhic prayer in the minds of the *rishonim*.<sup>13</sup>

This assumption may result from the fact that Rambam's views on the

12. Heinemann, *ibid.*, p. 78. Rabbi Shimon ben Netanel was an older contemporary of Rabbi Eliezer, both of whom were students of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai. Rabbi Shimon obviously took the institution of obligatory prayer for granted when he taught "When you pray, don't make your prayer *keva*. . . ." If his colleague Rabbi Eliezer completely disagreed with him (disavowing obligatory prayer) he wouldn't have used the exact same words! The two passages were cited in chapter one.

13. Ezra Fleischer, for instance, mentions that when modern scholars became acquainted with the liturgical material from the Cairo Geniza, they found that early prayer text were much less "inflexible" (*nuksheh*) than the medieval scholars had thought. As we shall see in chapter ten, Fleischer himself agrees that the prayer texts were intended to be inflexible wordings when they were first instituted, and his approach is quite similar to Rambam's, who also believed this. But in this chapter we will show that Rambam's view was, on the contrary, a minority opinion. For most medieval halakhists the prayer texts were *not* inflexible, as this chapter will

topic are the only ones that are widely known, and he indeed believed in a prescribed text, word for word, as we shall see. But this chapter and the next will show that Rambam's view, far from being representative, was actually the exception among medieval halakhists and not the dominant view at all. This should not be surprising; in fact, it would have been impossible for Rambam's view to be the only one. This is because the medieval rabbis who bore the talmudic tradition were compelled to interpret all of the earlier passages relevant to the question of whether Hazal composed an exact *nosah*, including the many statements that cast doubt upon its existence. If the rabbinic evidence had the potential to lead modern scholars in two different directions, it had exactly the same potential for the *rishonim*. As it turns out, the modern academic debate about whether there was an "original *nosah*" of the prayers is paralleled in many ways by the conflicting statements on the issue by later interpreters of the Talmud.

The discussion of this topic in medieval times was largely based on the interpretation of a single mishna (*Berakhot* 1:4, 11a). By the ways later rabbis interpreted this mishna, and in the comments that it inspired, there lies an entire spectrum of opinion on our topic. As we shall see, the rabbinic debate was much broader and more lively than the two polarized positions offered by Heinemann and Finkelstein.

Before reading the Mishna that served as the textual basis for the debate, one technical aspect of blessings must be made clear: all blessings must either begin or end with the typical formula "*Barukh attah . . .*," and some blessings have it both at the beginning and at the end. When a blessing begins with these words it is said to possess a *petiha* ("opening"), and when it ends with the *Barukh* formula it is said to have a *hatima* ("closing"). Without this formula, no prayer technically qualifies as an official *berakha* ("blessing").

With this background about "openings" and "closings," we can now examine the Mishna's attempt to standardize the format of the prescribed blessings:

In the morning, one says two blessings before [the *Shema*], and one afterwards. And in the evening—two before it and two afterwards, one long one and one short one.

Where they said to lengthen [the blessing], one may not shorten it. [Where they said] to be short, one may not lengthen it. [Where they said] to use a closing formula, one is not permitted to omit it. [Where they said] not to use a closing formula, one may not use it.

This Mishna clarifies the number of blessings before and after the *Shema* in the morning and in the evening, and it also stipulates that a blessing may be neither "shortened" nor "lengthened," nor may it have a "closing

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show. For Fleischer's comment see *Ha-Yotzerot be-Hithavutam uve-Hitpathutam* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984), p. 11.

formula" either added to it or removed from it. However, two major ambiguities still remain regarding the Mishna's text:

- (1) Which specific blessings did the Mishna refer to when it said "one long one and one short one"?
- (2) Does "lengthening" a blessing mean to add an "opening" or "closure" to it, and does "shortening" it mean to omit one? Or are "opening/closing" formulas and "lengthening/shortening" two entirely separate concepts, in which case the Mishna is stating two different rules?

Most Sephardic authorities (such as Rambam and Rashba) interpreted "opening" or "closing" a blessing to be practically the same thing as "lengthening" it: one may not "lengthen" the text of a "short" blessing so that it will require a closing, nor may he "shorten" a "long" one so that the "closing" will no longer be necessary. According to this interpretation, when the Mishna said "one long one and one short one" it meant the two blessings *before Shema*: the first one always opens and closes with "*Barukh*" but the second one has no "opening." For our purposes, this view could mean that there is no rabbinic prohibition against tampering with the inner text of a blessing, so long as one maintains the correct format for those blessings with "closing formulas" and for those without a closure.

However, Rashi had an entirely different understanding of the Mishna. He wrote that "one long one and one short one" is an explicit reference to "the two after it in the evening prayer," the long one being the blessing right after *Shema* starting with the words "*emet ve-emunah*," and the short one the blessing "*hashkivenu*." (Neither of these blessings opens with "*Barukh*.") Rashi seems to imply that there are two different rules in the Mishna:

- (1) A person may not add to ("lengthen") nor lessen ("shorten") the number of words in the texts of blessings such as *emet ve-emunah* or *hashkivenu*.<sup>14</sup>
- (2) A person also may not add a "closing formula" in the wrong blessing, nor omit one where it does belong.

The second rule is agreed upon by all, including Rambam and Rashba. But the first implication that one may not add to or subtract from the texts of blessings seems to oppose the widely accepted practice of inserting *piyyutim* (liturgical poems) into the texts of the various blessings (including the blessings mentioned by Rashi). Surely, adding an entire *piyyut* "length-

14. I wrote that Rashi only "seems to imply" this. Indeed, even Rashi may not have prohibited changing the number of words in a blessing, but only adding or subtracting from the number of topics (*inyanim*) mentioned in the blessing. Meiri suggests this possibility in his explanation of Rashi's view. Meiri's explanation of Rashi fits Rashi's comment about *keva*, which we quoted earlier in chapter one: "Just like today—it was the same yesterday and it will be the same tomorrow!" (See chapter one, note 17.)

ens" a blessing, especially since many of the *piyyutim* are much longer than the blessings themselves!

Rashi's grandson, Rabbenu Tam, reinterpreted the Mishna in such a way that adding *piyyutim* and making other changes in the texts of blessings can be justified. Without going into detail, he would have translated the last part of the Mishna somewhat like this:

Whether a blessing is long or short, if they said it must be long one may not shorten it, [and if they said] it must be short then one may not lengthen it. [Where they said] to use a closing formula, one is not permitted to omit it. [Where they said] not to use a closing formula, one may not use it.<sup>15</sup>

Rabbenu Tam agrees with Rashi that there are two rules in the Mishna, but disagrees about the meaning of the first. Both agree that the very end of the Mishna prohibits improperly adding or omitting a "closing" for any blessing. But for Rabbenu Tam, the issue of "shortening" or "lengthening" is only relevant when the rabbis of the Talmud *explicitly* ruled that the text of a *specific* blessing must be either "long" or "short." These instances are specified in a *baraita* which he quotes (see *Tosefta Berakhot* 1:7–10), but at all other times there is no objection to "lengthening" or "shortening" a blessing. Thus, the practice of adding *piyyutim* is almost always permissible.

Rabbenu Tam's permissive stance on *piyyutim* was quoted frequently, and his ruling was widely accepted in Ashkenazic communities. But some Sephardic scholars such as Rashba, whom we mentioned above, made strong arguments against it on a textual basis.<sup>16</sup> These proofs against Rabbenu Tam helped make that interpretation of the Mishna that Rashba shared with Rambam and others the prevalent one in later times. This Sephardic interpretation was actually more permissive than Rabbenu Tam's, because it *always* allowed textual changes to the body of a blessing as long as the structure of "openings" and "closings" is preserved. The crucial point is that neither the accepted Ashkenazic reading of this mishna (by Rabbenu Tam) nor the Sephardic reading prohibit changing the number of words in blessings. Later we will see that Rambam discouraged textual

15. This interpretation by Rabbenu Tam was often quoted by his successors. The most convenient source is *Berakhot* 11a, *tosafot* s. v. *ahat aruka ve-ahat ketzara*. Rabbenu Tam was also quoted approvingly by Rabbenu Yonah on *Rif, Berakhot* 5b and Meiri on *Berakhot* 11b, and a somewhat fuller version is found in *Tosafot Rabbi Yehuda in Berakha Meshuleshet* (no place or publisher listed, 1987), pp. 7–9.

The full *teshuva* by Rabbenu Tam on this matter is quoted in *Mahzor Vitry* (Nuremberg, 1923), pp. 362–5; also see *Shibbolei ha-Leket* #28 (ed. Mirsky, [Jerusalem: Sura, 5726]), pp. 209–218.

16. Rabbenu Tam's arguments are discussed at length along with some sharp criticisms in the commentaries of Rashba and Rashbetz to *Berakhot* 11b. Also see the *Tur* (68), where Rabbenu Tam's position is described as *dohak* (forced) because of these criticisms (but also read the comment of *Bah*).

changes and prohibited *piyyutim* for reasons unrelated to this mishna (chapter nine will be entirely devoted to his views). But for all practical purposes, Rashi's strict interpretation was entirely abandoned.

An interesting rule related to the above Mishna is found in a *baraita* quoted later in *Berakhot* (40b):

"If one saw bread and said, 'This bread is so wonderful, blessed is God who created it!'—he has fulfilled his obligation. [Or] if he saw a fig and said, 'This fig is so wonderful, blessed is God who created it'—he has fulfilled his obligation." These are the words of Rabbi Meir.

Rabbi Yose says, "Anyone who alters the format that the sages gave to the blessings [*matbea`she-tave`u hakhamim bivrakhot*] has not fulfilled his obligation."<sup>17</sup>

A bit later, the gemara brings an example which shows how original one can be with the words in blessings and still not be considered to have changed the *matbea`* (format):

Benjamin the shepherd began to eat bread and said: "*Berikh Mareih de-hai Pitta* [Aramaic: Blessed is the Master of this bread]."

Rav said, "He fulfilled his obligation."

In its version of this incident, the Talmud Yerushalmi (6:2) actually records a conversation between Rav and the shepherd:

A Persian Jew came before Rav [and asked], "I ate bread, but since I am not educated enough to pronounce the blessing on it I said, 'Blessed is He who created this bread.' Have I fulfilled my obligation?"

Rav replied, "Yes."

However, there is a rule that any blessing must both mention *shem* (a name of God) and *malhut* (His dominion). Therefore the gemara asked,

But didn't Rav say, "Any blessing which doesn't mention God's name (*shem*) is not considered a blessing?"

[The answer is] that Benjamin actually said, "Blessed is the Merciful One [*Rahamana*, which counts as *shem*], the Master of this bread."

The conclusion is that if one rephrases blessings, even in other languages, he still fulfils his obligation as long as he includes *shem* and *malhut*.

17. *Kesef Mishna* on *Hilkhot Berakhot* 1:5 tries to determine exactly what Rabbi Yose objected to in the extemporaneous blessing that Rabbi Meir found completely satisfactory. One suggestion is that the phrase "God who created it" is too general (as compared to "who brings up bread from the earth" which specifies what God created). The other possibility is that Rabbi Meir omitted *shem* and *malhut*. For a complete discussion see chapter nine, note 8.

It is interesting that after the time of the Talmud, some authorities applied Rabbi Yose's term "*matbea`she-tave`u hakhamim*" generically, to the requirement for *shem* and *malhut*, to the external format of the blessings (the closures for "long" blessings) and to their inner texts.<sup>18</sup> Regardless, the story of Benjamin the shepherd implies that as long as a few basic rules are observed, there is a great deal of room left for creativity in the language of blessings.<sup>19</sup>

The impression that wording of blessings was meant to be flexible also fits nicely with the well-known permission to add personal requests during the *bakkashot* (petitions) of *Shemoneh Esrei*. In chapter four we saw that petition is the most prominent type of biblical and rabbinic prayer, but not the only kind. Thus, even if prayer texts are meant to be flexible, it is understandable that extemporaneous personal requests are not acceptable during blessings that are primarily meant to praise God or thank Him. Such requests would be out of tune with the themes of such blessings: to adopt rabbinic phraseology, they would not be "*me'en ha-berakha* [of the nature of the blessing]." But in blessings that are themselves petitions for average human needs, a private petition would be entirely appropriate. This is the thrust of a four-part passage in *Avodah Zara* (8a):

(1) Rabbi Yehuda said in the name of Shemuel: The law is that a person asks for his needs in the blessing of *Shomea` Tefilla* ["Who answers prayer," a general blessing concerned with all of a person's needs].

(2) Rabbi Yehuda the son of Rav Shemuel bar Shilat said in the name of Rav: Even though they said, "A person asks for his needs in the blessing of *Shomea` Tefilla*," if he wants to say something *me'en kol berakhah* [related to the theme of each blessing] at the end of each blessing, he should say it.

(3) Rabbi Hiyya bar Ashi said in the name of Rav: Even though they

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18. For instance, in *Hilkhoh Keriat Shema`* (1:7), Rambam uses the phrase *matbea`shetave`u hakhamim bivrakhot* to refer to the external format, while in *Hilkhoh Berakhot* (1:5–6) he uses it to refer to the requirement for *shem* and *malhut* or to a specific phraseology (see *Kesef Mishna*).

According to one interpretation of Rambam, even if one omits a "closure" he has still fulfilled his obligation after the fact (see *Biur ha-Gra* to *Orah Hayyim* 68).

19. A similar story about substituting an ad hoc formulation in Aramaic for the standard text is recorded in *Berakhot* 54b:

What blessing does he say [when his life is saved]? Rav Yehuda said: "*Barukh gomel hasadim tovim* [Blessed is He who grants wonderful kindnesses]."

. . . Rav Yehuda became ill and then he was healed. Rav Hana of Baghdad and other rabbis visited him. They said to him: "*Berikh Rahamana dihavakh nihalan, ve-lo yehavakh le-afra* [Aramaic: Blessed is the Merciful One, who has returned you to us instead of turning you to dust]."

Rav Yehuda said to them: "You have fulfilled my obligation to say [a blessing of] thanks!"

said, "A person asks for his needs in the blessing of *Shomea` Tefilla*," if a member of his household is ill he should mention it in the Blessing for the Sick, and if he has monetary needs he should mention it in *Birkat ha-Shanim* [the "Blessing of the Years," which concerns material well-being].

(4) Rabbi Yehoshua` ben Levi said: Even though they said, "A person asks for his needs in the blessing of *Shomea` Tefilla*," if after his prayer he comes to say something as [lengthy as] the Yom Kippur service, he should say it.<sup>20</sup>

The simplest and most widely accepted interpretation of this passage is that there is really no argument among these four authorities; rather, each simply adds a point that the others would fully agree to (see Rosh and Rambam *Hilkhot Tefilla* 6:2–3). The first point (Shemuel's) is that since *Shomea` Tefilla* is not about any specific type of human need, an individual may express any sort of personal need in it. The second and third of these four statements are both in the name of Rav, and their content is very similar as well. Again, the accepted understanding is that they simply agree with each other: Rav holds that besides the general permission to add any request in *Shomea` Tefilla*, a person may also request whatever appropriately matches the specific theme for any of the middle blessings of petition. Finally, Rabbi Yehoshua` ben Levi points out that a person may request anything, and may speak to God about his personal needs even at very great length, immediately after the framework of the formal blessings in *Shemoneh Esrei*. The only difference between this and *Shomea` Tefilla* is that in *Shomea` Tefilla* he may not extend the blessing indefinitely. In conclusion, according to the halakha a person may always add his own requests to blessings of petition. The only essential limitation is that they must relate naturally to the topic of the blessing.<sup>21</sup>

However, when we say that individual requests must relate naturally to the topic of the blessing, this applies in a wider sense as well. It means that such requests should only be added to blessings that themselves concern requests, i.e., blessings of *bakkasha*. It is not appropriate, however, to add petitions in blessings whose theme is *not* petition, but praise or thanks instead. The Talmud makes this point clear (*Berakhot* 34a):

Rav Yehuda said: A person may not ask for his needs in the first three [blessings] and in the last three [blessings of the *Amida*], but only in the middle blessings. For Rabbi Hanina said: What are the first three [blessings] like? A slave who praises his master. What are the middle ones like? A slave who asks a favor from his master. What are the last

20. In *Berakhot* 31a, the fourth statement (of Rabbi Yehoshua` ben Levi) is quoted both as a *baraita* and in the name of Rav Hiyya bar Ashi quoting Rav.

21. My simple statement that "this is the only essential limitation" on adding petitions, though I believe it to be fully true, actually requires extensive justification. See the "Technical Note on Adding Petitions" below, at the end of this chapter.



ones like? A slave who has received a gift from his master, who thanks him and departs.

Rabbi Hanina's analogy is a vivid illustration of the "social analogy" for prayer: the structure of the *Amida* is based on the relationship of a slave to his master. But for our purposes here, the critical point is that Rav Yehuda teaches us something special about what the "theme" of a blessing is, giving us a better understanding of what *me'en ha-berakha* actually means. Rav Yehuda tells us, for example, that since the purpose of the first three blessings is to imitate a slave praising his benevolent and kind master, then petitions are not appropriate because the slave wouldn't dare beg for his gift before concluding his praise. The same is true of the last three blessings, in which the time for asking is already over; these may not include personal requests because they are meant to thank the master and praise him again for his kindness.

Rav Yehuda's point is not, then, to freeze the texts of the first and last three blessings, but just to point out that *petitions* are forbidden during them because petition does not match the overall theme in blessings of praise. There is no implication whatsoever that other additions (of praise or thanks) would be wrong: only requests are out of place here. In fact, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef has shown that the opposite scenario is equally forbidden for precisely the same reason: during the middle blessings of petition, one may not add general *praises* of God or His glory if these have no direct connection to basic human needs. Obviously, this is because such praises are not *me'en ha-berakha*.<sup>22</sup>

Paradoxically, Rav Yehuda's implicit flexibility regarding praise or thanks ultimately led some later authorities to go much further, even justifying certain *requests* during these blessings! These authorities had to justify the fact that many phrases in the last blessings do indeed seem to be requests, and furthermore that *piyyutim* (which are full of requests) are often added to these blessings. Their justification of these two facts is simple, and is based squarely on Rav Yehuda's statement: they argued that "it is only individual needs that may not be asked during them, but for the needs of the many it is permitted. . . . Even when the slave praises his master it is permitted to ask for public needs, because it is the praise and glory of the Master that the many are dependent on Him."<sup>23</sup>

Thus, the only clear talmudic limitation on adding to the texts in the

22. *Yabia Omer*, vol. 5 (13:2, 4). I have presented the rule about adding to the first three blessings according to the majority opinion. However, Rambam disagrees and writes that "we never add or subtract anything from the first three blessings or the last three blessings, nor do we change anything in them" (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 1:9 in the regular printings). See chapter nine for a full discussion of his views.

23. *Tur Orah Hayyim* 112, based on *tosafot*, Rabbenu Tam and Rosh in the name of Rabbenu Hannanel and Rav Hai Gaon. *Beit Yosef* points out that this is also the opinion of Rabbenu Yonah and Ran, but Rashba and Rabbenu Hannanel are wary of applying the idea to the first three blessings. Their wariness has its roots in geonic objections; for the specific reference, see chapter twelve, the end of note 34.

body of most blessings is that such additions must be *me'en ha-berakha*, reflecting the nature of the blessing (and even this point was interpreted with great flexibility by some later authorities). With this point we conclude our talmudic examples of flexibility in the wording of blessings. The rest of this chapter will examine how post-talmudic authorities in the Middle Ages and later interpreted these sources, and what conclusions they arrived at about the existence or non-existence of an exact and "official" rabbinic text for prayer.

### RABBINIC DENIERS OF AN "OFFICIAL TEXT" FOR PRAYER

About seven centuries ago in Spain, Rabbi Shelomo ben Avraham ibn Adret (known as Rashba, 1235–1310) arrived at the conclusion that there were never exact, "official" texts for the blessings. His is the medieval opinion most closely approximating what later became the position of Shadal, Elbogen, and Heinemann. In his commentary on our mishna<sup>24</sup> he wrote an extended essay proving that Hazal never enacted "official" texts. Here is an excerpt:

It seems to me that when the mishna taught "When they said to be short one may not lengthen, and when they said to lengthen one may not shorten" it doesn't mean that one may not shorten or lengthen the text of the blessing, i.e., not to add or subtract words. Because if that were so, they should have instituted the text of each and every blessing with specific numbers of words, and to teach us the exact text of each blessing. But we don't find this anywhere! All that they taught us were those words which are specifically required, such as in the discussions about mentioning rain, dew, and wind. . . .

But when it comes to the rest of the *nosah* of the blessings, the rabbis never gave a measure, saying that a person must say an exact number of words, no more and no less! And they never told us how many words must be said in a blessing in order for it to be considered "long" or "short." And not only this, but they explicitly said (*Berakhot* 40b) that "in the eighteen blessings of prayer, if one wants to add something about the topic of any blessing he may add it." And this is true even if the words of his addition will be more than the main part of the blessing, and even though those blessings are short ones [and he makes them long]. . . .

And we concluded in case of Minyamin<sup>25</sup> the shepherd (*Berakhot* 40b) that even if he said, "*Berikh Rahamana Mareih de-hai pitta*

24. See *Hiddushei ha-Rashba* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kuk, 1984), cols. 38–43. (Also see n. 12\* there, as well as their edition of *Hiddushei Ha-Ritva* [Jerusalem, 1984], p. 100 n. 3.

25. Minyamin the shepherd is called Benjamin in our version of the Babylonian Talmud (as quoted above).

[Aramaic: Blessed be the Merciful One, the Master of this bread]" he has fulfilled his obligation! And the gemara implies that to do so is fully permissible [*lekhatilla*]. . . .<sup>26</sup>

Rabbi David Abudarham seems to have held a similar view. In the year 1340 in Spain, thirty years after Rashba's death, he wrote what was probably the first complete commentary ever on Jewish prayers and synagogue customs.<sup>27</sup> Abudarham was well aware that there were numerous competing versions of the blessings and prayers, and this led him to cast doubt upon the existence of one "official" text. He mentioned this doubt in his commentary at the end of his discussion of *Shemoneh Esrei*:

Some people have counted the words of each of the eighteen blessings, and found biblical verses for each blessing which match its theme and the number of its words. At first, I made such a count myself. But then I realized that there is no basis at all for this practice, because there is no place in the world where the eighteen blessings are said just one way, word for word! Rather, some people add words and others omit them. If so, such a count is useless other than for he who makes it. Why should we bother the scribes to copy it?<sup>28</sup>

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26. In Jewish law, any variation in the manner of performing a mitzvah, if it is not totally invalid, falls into one of the following two categories:

- (1) (*Le-khatilla*) (literally: "as in the first place") means that the doing the mitzvah in this way is entirely permissible and there is no objection to it whatsoever.
- (2) (*Be-di'avad*) (literally: "when it is done") means that one should *not* perform the mitzvah in this manner. However, once it has been done it is deemed acceptable even though it was not done in the proper way. After the fact the action still serves to fulfil one's halakhic obligation, and the halakha does not demand repeating the mitzvah in a "better" way.

In the case of Benjamin/Minyamin, Rashba concluded that it is fully permissible (*lekhatilla*) to rephrase a blessing. This is because immediately afterwards the gemara connects Benjamin's unique blessing (which suffices for the first blessing of *Birkat ha-Mazon* as well as for "*Ha-Motzi*") to the rule that *Birkat ha-Mazon* may be recited in any language (*lekhatilla*). Rashba's opinion is accepted by Rema in *Orah Hayyim* 68.

But it is also possible to maintain a stricter position, namely: It is wrong to change any words in a blessing, but if he did alter the text (like Benjamin did) then *bedi'avad* (after the fact) he has still fulfilled his obligation. Rambam was the major authority to hold this opinion; we will briefly summarize his view below in this chapter, and then discuss it at great length in chapter nine. For a full discussion of Rashba's lenient opinion versus Rambam's strict view in later halakhic decision-making, see chapter nine, note 9.

27. The biographical information is from *Abudarham ha-Shalem* (Jerusalem: Usha, 1963), pp. 3–4.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 105. This passage is quoted by Rabbi Yosef Karo in *Beit Yosef on Tur, Orah Hayyim* 113, as an alternative view to that of the Hasidei Ashkenaz, who seem

Like Rashba, Abudarham considered it futile to count the words in blessings since no Jewish community had a standardized text. But Rashba went further by *proving* that the rabbis of the Talmud never attempted to create a standard text in the first place. (It seems that Abudarham agreed with this view, because he is not at all bothered by the fact that people add or omit words in blessings.) Rashba's talmudic proof texts, some of which we did not cite here, are much the same as those later utilized by Heinemann. It is not surprising that Rashba drew the same conclusion in the fourteenth century as Heinemann did in our time.

In the years following Abudarham, another Spanish authority who also did not put much stock in the idea of one "correct" text for the various blessings was Rabbi Shimon ben Tzemah Duran (known by his acronym Rashbetz, 1361–1444), in his responsa (*Teshuvot Rashbetz*, or simply *Tashbetz*).<sup>29</sup> One of the morning blessings praises God for enabling the rooster to distinguish between day and night. A questioner asked Rashbetz whether it is the proper word for that blessing is *lehavin* (to "understand" the difference between day and night) or *lehavhin* (to "distinguish"). In his response (no. 247) he showed that both words make sense in the context of the blessing, and he concluded as follows:

We are used to saying "*lehavin*." But it is wrong to criticize a person who says "*lehavhin*," and it is not considered changing the format [of the blessing]. Because "changing the format" is only forbidden in blessings when one changes the opening—to open with "*Barukh . . .*" or not to do so—when it is against the format created by our rabbis, of blessed memory. [It is also forbidden] to change the closure, to improperly add the closing formula "*Barukh . . .*" or to omit it, or to change those things which are important to the blessing, such as mentioning [God's power over] dew or rain, or asking for rain.

But when it comes to the *nosah* of the blessing in other less important matters such as "*lehavin*" or "*lehavhin*"—this is not considered "changing the format." And the rabbis did say (*Avoda Zara* 8a) that if one has a sick person in his home he should lengthen the blessing for the sick, and if he needs material sustenance he may lengthen the blessing for that. And we add liturgical poems in the middle of the blessings and prayers, but it is not considered forbidden as "changing the format" as long as the poems are about the topic of the blessing.

A second questioner, who was apparently asking about the origins of certain blessings, prompted Rashbetz to discuss the texts of blessings from a slightly different perspective (no. 161):

Rambam already explained (Laws of Prayer 1:4) that the *Anshei Knesset ha-Gedolah* (Men of the Great Assembly) instituted the text of the

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to have been Abudarham's target when he criticized those who count the words of prayers. We will discuss their views later in this chapter.

29. *She'elot u-Teshuvot Tashbetz* (Lemberg, 1891).

Blessings. Even though, in his opinion, prayer is from the Torah, its text is not from the Torah, and every person used to pray as he wished for what he needed. And there is no doubt that the *nosah* we use today is not what was used during the period of the [First] Temple. This is because we pray for David's rule to return, and for the Temple to be rebuilt speedily in our days, and for our exiles to be regathered. But they would pray for the David's dynasty to stand. And when the Kohen Gadol used say the blessing of "Retzelt" on Yom ha-Kippurim, what he said wasn't like our text. It is well known that Joshua instituted the blessing "al ha-aretz," and that David and Solomon instituted "boneh Yerushalayim." But there is no doubt that this was not the way that we say them, as the commentaries have explained.<sup>30</sup>

While Rashbetz did accept Rambam's opinion that the *Anshei Knesset ha-Gedolah* composed prayers, he was convinced they never meant to establish one "correct" text that would be binding. In no. 161 he states that there is no problem changing prayers (even those composed by Joshua or David!) based on new historical realities. And in no. 247 he found no objection to re-stating the blessings based on the personal desires of an individual or the preferences of an entire community, as long as the basic structure enacted by the rabbis is preserved.

Rashbetz affirmed this liberal position in his commentary on our mishna (*Berakhot* 11b), where he accepted Rashba's conclusion that the prohibition to "lengthen" or "shorten" blessings does *not* disallow changing words, but only prohibits changing the outward structure and format of blessings as explained in the Talmud. He disagreed with Rashba about some nuances of interpretation, arguing that the "length" of blessings can mean different things in different contexts, and does not always mean having both an "opening" and a "closing" as Rashba thought. As he applied this more subtle approach to the sources, he was able to interpret some of them with greater ease than Rashba. But Rashbetz agreed with Rashba about the practical halakhic result. The essay on our topic in Rashbetz's commentary takes the views of all his predecessors into account, and addresses all the aspects of the issue with subtlety and care. It may justifiably be thought of as the "final word" in the halakhic discussion about the binding nature of prayer texts according to the medieval scholars of the Talmud.<sup>31</sup>

30. For similar sentiments about what the prayers said during Temple times, see *Siddur Rav Saadya Gaon*, ed. E. Davidson et al. (Jerusalem: Reuben Mas, 1970), p. 6. For a different perspective see *Beit Elokim, Sha'ar ha-Yesodot*, chaps. 38 and 61 on free prayer before the Men of the Great Assembly, the creation of the fixed tefillot, and how prayer will be in the messianic era. Some of what he says, especially regarding *birkat ha-mazon*, is much less convincing than Rashbetz.

31. *Perush Ha-Rashbetz 'al Berakhot*, ed. David Tzvi Hillman (Bnei Brak: Oznayim la-Torah, 1971), 44b–50a. Rashbetz wrote a carefully thought-out critique of Rashba's essay, basing his views on a careful re-examination of all the rabbinic texts

In short, Rashba, Abudarham, and Rashbetz all felt that Hazal never mandated "official" texts for the blessings. (I briefly mentioned above that this also seems to have been the opinion of Saadya Gaon.) Rather, each individual is entitled to express the idea of a *berakha* in his own words when he stands before God.

### RABBINIC BELIEVERS IN AN "OFFICIAL TEXT"

We saw above that Rashi's interpretation of the mishna about "lengthening" and "shortening" blessings may prohibit textual changes. However, Rashi's grandson, Rabbenu Ya'akov Tam, found himself forced to reject Rashi's interpretation for various reasons, partially in order to justify the prevalent custom of adding *piyyutim* to the texts of blessings. The French and German scholars who succeeded Rashi all relied on Rabbenu Tam's opinion, and Rashi's view on this matter had little practical impact.

Instead, Rambam became the most influential halakhic authority in medieval times who believed that Hazal composed an exact "official" text for all of the blessings, and that it was proper to recite certain specific words without any deviations. However, he also recognized that the halakha considers deviations from the standard text to be valid. A full understanding of how Rambam resolves these two points requires a separate discussion (see chapter nine, "Rambam on Prayer as a Fixed Text"). Here I will summarize my conclusions about Rambam's approach, and then deal with the views of some later figures who held much stronger views than he did about the importance of using the "official" text for prayer.

Rambam wrote that the Jews who returned to the Land of Israel from

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relating to changing the *matbe'a*. In the end, as we said, he found himself forced to reject Rashba's theory that "length" in the Talmud must *always* refer to the "long format [*matbe'a*]" of "openings" and "closings," but in practice Rashbetz agreed that "lengthening" and "shortening" blessings as spoken of in our mishna has nothing to do with changing the number of words, and he completely accepted Rashba's interpretation for the mishna.

The key to Rashbetz's interpretation is that he allows for the possibility that "length" can mean different things in different contexts. He agreed with Rashba that a "long" blessing may mean one with both an "opening" and a "closing," as it does in our mishna. But Rashbetz adds that "length" can sometimes refer to how many different ideas (*'inyanim*) are expressed in a blessing, and with this he is able to interpret certain key talmudic passages without the difficulties they caused for others. (An *'inyan* has nothing to do with the number of words, because an idea can be expressed either at great length or concisely. The crucial thing is that no matter how many ideas are expressed, they must be related to the overall topic of the blessing [*me'en ha-berakha*]. Thus, to add *piyyutim* during a blessing is permissible as long as their content matches the theme of the blessing.)

I must admit that I am quite partial to Rashbetz's reading of the sources, and I fully accept his claim that his interpretation is based on "sensible ideas, and no question remains about them." I urge anyone with a serious interest in this issue to study Rashbetz's entire essay with care.

exile in Babylon were no longer fluent in Hebrew. Therefore, in order to preserve Hebrew as the language of prayer, Ezra and his court composed blessings and tefillot for the people to recite in Hebrew. It would not have been sufficient for the leaders to enact a general format for blessings and let people supply their own words (as Rashba thought), because people had such a poor command of Hebrew; instead, it became necessary to prescribe complete texts for them, word for word, in clear, understandable Hebrew.

The Talmud discusses various details of the blessings and says that a person has not fulfilled his obligation without them. This implies that *other* minor changes in the text do not invalidate a blessing, but it still does not mean that making such changes is the proper thing to do. Instead, the ideal remains for a person to recite the "official" text of a blessing, though if he does make small changes in the words he still fulfils his obligation.

Thus, Rambam assumes that all of the blessings should be recited just as they were originally composed, word for word. He considers this to be self-evident, even though Hazal never actually decreed that changing the words is forbidden. It is not fitting to change words simply because these texts were meant to be recited in their exact form when they were first composed.

Despite what has been said, Rambam was undoubtedly aware that many versions of the tefillot existed, with only minor differences between them. Rambam wrote down the *nosah* of tefilla that he preferred; his version is in the same clear, simple Hebrew that he believed Ezra and his court used, and its phraseology causes no halakhic objections. But there is no evidence that Rambam considered his *nosah* to be the "original" text, nor is there any reason to believe that he would object to any other *nosah* that met his halakhic and linguistic criterion. While Rambam preferred that Jews stay as close as possible to the original text, he was undoubtedly aware that countless variations do exist, making it impossible to determine the exact "original" words. But for Rambam this is insignificant, as long as whatever text a Jew does choose can fulfil Ezra's goals.

Others had much stronger views than Rambam on the importance of reciting the exact words in each and every blessing. These views are best represented by Rabbi Ya'akov ben Tzvi Emden (known as Ya'avetz). Ya'avetz, an eighteenth-century figure, is well-known for his critical approach to Jewish texts. His most famous and controversial opinions were his denial of Maimonidean authorship for "The Guide to the Perplexed," in which he found quasi-heretical tendencies, and his denial of the antiquity of parts of the Zohar.<sup>32</sup> He also analyzed important Jewish texts which had become corrupted from being copied and recopied by often-careless scribes, and he longed to see such texts free from scribal errors, in the forms that their authors originally gave them.<sup>33</sup> As the author of a scholarly commen-

32. "Emden, Jacob," in *Encyclopedia Judaica* 6, cols. 721–724.

33. See Rabbi Ya'akov Emden's comments in *Migdal 'Oz, Beit Middot* 22 (*'Aliyat ha-Zekhira*), about the corrupt text of the ethical work popularly called *Orhot Tzaddikim*: "They have given up on correcting it . . . to heal it or to soothe its

tary on the prayers, he applied these same text-critical assumptions to the siddur itself. It is for this reason that he criticized Rabbi David Abudarham directly, in very harsh terms, for his negative attitude towards counting the words of blessings:

One must realize that the texts of the eighteen blessings (as well as the rest of the blessings)—one hundred and twenty elders and prophets (the Men of the Great Assembly) carefully considered each and every word, and weighed it in their holy minds, and they instituted the blessings with great consideration and exactness. In any case, it is a very wonderful thing that for the first three blessings, we—all the people of Israel in all the places of their dispersion—say exactly the same words. Even if they have been separated from each other as far as east is from west, they have guarded against any change in them. Not the slightest thing has been added, no word has been lost or changed, because they knew that this [text must be preserved] strictly.

And this is what Rabbi Yehiel said: "The Hasidei Ashkenaz are interpreters of lists, who counted and recorded the numbers of words of the prayers and the blessings, and what they symbolize. They said there are 107 words in the first three blessings: the first has 42 words, the second has 51 words. . . ." His [Rabbi Yehiel's] reward is secure [for preserving this count], and he didn't labor in vain! Whether he was correct in all that he recorded, or some of it, or even if none of it is correct, in any event the reward for his good intentions will not be kept from him.

*And may God forgive Rabbi David Abudarham who mocked this practice, and said that this counting is only valuable for the one who makes it, but to no-one else, since he realized that not all Israel have the same nosah, word for word.* But even if this is true, [Rabbi Yehiel] gained himself merit for his good intentions, and helped others by listing the words in each blessing. Because there is no doubt that the Men of the Great Assembly who wrote them were very particular about the number of words, even granting that they didn't mean these numbers to symbolize anything. In any case, they were certainly exacting about the language, that it be a clear text that would be equally understandable to all of Israel, as the Rambam wrote.

And if over the course of time and through the many copyings that were done during times of persecution, and through "pouring from vessel to vessel" the texts changed between the distant places from east to west, that is the fault of the scribes and the copiers. And nevertheless, this only caused the nosah to be divided into two forms [Ashkenazic and Sephardic]. . . . *One version is definitely incorrect. . . . And since we do not know clearly who possesses the first, true tradition, each [group] keeps its own version, and justifies it as best as it can. . . .*

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sores . . . because it[s] text] has been wounded so many times for no good reason. . . ."



*If only the earlier generations had written the numbers of words of the prayers and blessings in books, as they knew it! They would certainly have helped themselves, and those who came after them, just like the work of the Masoretes on the Bible. . . . It is not a worthless endeavor, and the Zohar, too, was involved in this. . . .*<sup>34</sup>

Rabbi Emden believed in preserving the original text so strongly that he criticized Abudarham in the words of the gemara in *Sanhedrin* (99a). When Rabbi Hillel made the radical claim that "There is no Messiah for Israel!" the gemara responded "May God forgive Rabbi Hillel! [*Shari leih Mareih le-Rabbi Hillel!*]" Rabbi Ya'akov Emden chose the same words in his response to Rabbi David Abudarham's views on the text of the siddur.

Emden's "non-ideological" view is almost identical to the one that would eventually be articulated by Louis Finkelstein. Neither insisted on the existence of a "correct" text for its mystical value, but rather because of a text-critical assumption that textual variants always derive from one "original text." Rabbi Ya'akov Emden wrote that Hazal cared very much about every word in the tefillot "even granting that they didn't mean these numbers to symbolize anything." He wished that these texts had been preserved in their exact details, and he, too, would have "reconstructed" the original text if he had thought that he was capable of doing so. (As we saw earlier, Finkelstein later brought this view to its ultimate conclusion by actually attempting such a reconstruction.) The Masoretes, who carefully noted every detail in their textual tradition of the Bible, were Rabbi Ya'akov Emden's model for preserving the text of the siddur.

A possible objection to his position, however, lies in the fundamental difference between the Scriptures and the prayer book: the Bible is the Written Law, while prayer is part of the Oral Law. Oral traditions (as Heinemann later described regarding prayer) often develop in more complicated ways than by the corruption of a single original source.

## OTHER RABBINIC BELIEVERS IN AN "OFFICIAL TEXT": MYSTICS

When Abudarham dismissed those who counted the words of blessings, he was reacting specifically to the German rabbis of his time, an elite group of

34. "Sulam Beit El" 3:7 (This is the title of Rabbi Ya'akov Emden's introduction to his *Siddur Beit Ya'akov*.) My emphasis.

*Siddur Beit Ya'akov* has been reprinted by Eshkol (Jerusalem, 1993), and the new text is much easier to read. In the old edition, "Sulam Beit El" was practically illegible. This passage is found on pp. 52–53 in the new edition.

In part of this passage that I did not quote, Emden considered the Ashkenazic text to be less corrupted than the Sephardic text. It is possible that some of Emden's stress on the importance of the exact (Ashkenazic) text may have been a reaction to hasidism, besides the reasons he gave explicitly. This may be true as well for the students of the Vilna Gaon who also put enormous stress on the exact recitation of one fixed text (see below). I am grateful to Yechiel Greenbaum for this suggestion.

scholars and pietists that became known as the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* (not to be confused with the later hasidim of eastern Europe). We mentioned the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* briefly in chapter five.<sup>35</sup>

Their mystical views on prayer (which were also quoted above by Ya'avetz) included placing great value on the number of times each letter occurred, on sequences of letters and words, and on their numerical values. Because of this, they were obvious opponents of any tampering with the texts of the blessings, no matter how minor. Rabbi Ya'akov (the author of the *Tur*) recorded how his older brother, Rabbi Yehiel, described them: "The *Hasidei Ashkenaz* are interpreters of lists, who would count and record the number of words of the prayers and blessings, and what they symbolize. . . ."

It is important to note that despite these opinions about prayer, Rabbi Yehuda he-Hasid still encouraged ignorant Jews to pray in other languages if they did not understand Hebrew. He wrote:

If somebody comes to you who does not understand Hebrew, but he is God-fearing and wants to have kavvana, or if a woman comes to you, tell them they should learn the prayers in a language they understand. For prayer is nothing without comprehension by the heart. But if the heart does not understand what comes from one's lips, what value does it have for him? Therefore it is better to pray in the language that one understands.<sup>36</sup>

This means that even though each Hebrew letter has an important symbolic meaning, these can only matter to those who understand them.

The type of Jewish mysticism represented by the Zohar also stressed correct recitation. After the Zohar, numerically-based *kavvanot* became ever more complicated in the kabbala of Rabbi Isaac Luria (the "Ari," 1534–1572), as we said in chapter five.<sup>37</sup> Lurianic ideas became very influential, and they played a major part in raising the popular value placed on the text of the siddur even by those who did not study kabbala. In our day, Rabbi Nossan Scherman continued this trend when he emphasized the power of the words in the siddur in his "Overview" to *The Complete Artscroll Siddur*:

35. For some of the ascetic practices promoted by the *Hasidei Ashkenaz*, see *Roke'ah*, *Hilkhos Teshuva*, as well as *Sha'ar ha-Teshuva* in *Orhot Tzaddikim*, which quotes many of these penances. For a description of the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* and a comprehensive essay about their views on prayer, see Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1954), pp. 80–118. Also see H. H. Ben Sasson (ed.), *A History of the Jewish People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 545–553.

36. *Sefer Hasidim* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kuk, 1957), secs. 588 and 785.

37. For a good presentation of a Lurianic prayer, see David R. Blumenthal, *Understanding Jewish Mysticism: A Source Reader*, vol. 1 (New York, 1978), pp. 169–176. Blumenthal explains the meditation for *Barukh She-'amar* as prescribed in *Siddur Rashash*. In the case of Lurianic prayer, an example is a much better introduction than an abstract discussion.

Every word and syllable has a thousand effects in ways we cannot imagine. Even the mystical interpretations of Arizal [Rabbi Isaac Luria], who made known many of the Kabbalistic intentions that are contained within the text of the tefillah, barely scratched the surface of the meanings intended by the Men of the Great Assembly. Every word of Shemoneh Esrei is essential, separately and in the context of the entire prayer. The text was so profound and its effects so metaphysical and extraordinary, that it could not be entrusted to poets, only to prophets.<sup>38</sup>

The overwhelming difference between Rabbi Scherman's feelings about the words of the blessings and Rabbi David Abudarham's more cavalier attitude is almost shocking. Rabbi Scherman's statement (as well as much of the rest of the material in his "Overview") is based directly on the discussion of prayer by Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin in *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* (eighteenth–nineteenth centuries). Rabbi Hayyim was the leading disciple of the great Rabbi Eliyahu, known as the Gaon of Vilna, who was an outstanding kabbalist.<sup>39</sup> Thus, *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* is part of the long tradition of prayer-as-mysticism, a tradition which almost always placed great value on the "correct" words for prayers. In fact, later mystics believed that the exact Hebrew words of prayers had important spiritual effects, even if the pray-er was not aware of their "secret" powers. Unlike Rabbi Yehuda he-Hasid, this led to the conclusion that it is preferable for one to pray in Hebrew even if he does *not* understand what he is saying!<sup>40</sup>

38. *The Complete Artscroll Siddur*, ed. Nosson Scherman (New York: Mesorah, 1985), p. xv. Also see the discussion that follows on the next two pages there. Rabbi Scherman's "Overview" (including this quotation) is not included in *The Rabbinical Council of America Edition of The Artscroll Siddur* (New York: Mesorah, 1991).

39. On Rav Hayyim Volozhiner being the leading disciple of the Vilna Gaon, see Norman Lamm, *Torah Lishmah* (New York: Ktav, 1989), pp. 4–8.

40. Rabbi Scherman (*ibid.*) is able to write that "the halakhic authorities frown upon prayer in other languages" based on sources influenced by the kabbala. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef surveyed these sources in *Yabia' Omer*, vol. 5 (12:5). (In 12:4, Rabbi Yosef considers the opposite question: Does one fulfil his obligation if he prays in Hebrew but doesn't understand it? The conclusion is that he does, except for lack of *kavvana* in the first verse of *Shema* and the first blessing of the *Amida*.) A number of the sources he quotes explicitly reject the passage from *Sefer Hasidim* quoted above that encourages prayer in whatever language the *mitpallel* knows.

The best-known of the sources that "frown upon prayer in other languages" is an extended comment in *Biur Halakha* (on *Orah Hayyim* 101:4). He writes that prayer is preferable in another language that one understands

... only for a person who fears God, and his only reason to pray in another language is so that he will pray with *kavvana*. But if this is not so, he should pray in the holy tongue. The reason for this is that the holy tongue has more special meanings than other languages; this is the language in which God speaks to his prophets, as the Ramban wrote in [*Parashat Ki*] *Tissa* (Exodus 30:13). And Hazal said that the world was created with the holy tongue, as it

*Nefesh ha-Hayyim* emphasizes, in the strongest terms, that the power of prayer lies in reciting the one correct Hebrew text of the blessings:

One who is wise will understand on his own that it wasn't for nothing that one hundred and twenty elders, many of whom were prophets, were needed to establish a small petition, a short prayer like this one [the *Amida*]. On the contrary, they had deep wisdom through their holy spirits and their exalted prophetic inspiration, and all of the [secret] matters of creation and the Divine chariot were clear to them.

Therefore, they established and decreed the form [*matbea*] of the blessings and the prayers with these particular words since they saw and understood where the light of each individual word dwells. This

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is written, "This one shall be called *Isha* (Woman), for from *Ish* (Man) was she taken" (Genesis 2:23). And when the Men of the Great Assembly composed the tefillot they were one hundred and twenty elders, among them several prophets, and they formed each blessing—its words and the combinations of its letters—with many lofty, secret meanings. So when we say these words in the language of the Men of the Great Assembly, even if we do not know how to have kavvana [for their secret meanings] our prayer still achieves its purpose because the words themselves achieve their holy purposes in the upper world. This is not true if one prays in a foreign language.

For a thorough discussion of attitudes towards prayer in other languages from talmudic times until the twentieth century, see Hayyim Y. Hamli, "Makor, Targum, ve-Hiddush ba-Tefilla" in *Pirkei 'Iyyun ve-Hagut likhvod Moshe Kroma*, ed. Moshe Ishon (Jerusalem, 1986), pp. 195–240.

On the proof from Genesis that Hebrew was the "original" language of the world (and thus presumably has mystical powers) see *Bereshit Rabba* 18 and Ibn Ezra on Genesis 11:1, who wrote that "one language" is "most likely" to be Hebrew, but the verse is not a conclusive proof. (However, in the second version of his commentary he refers to Genesis 3:19, 4:25, and 5:29 as "proofs" that the original language was the Holy Tongue.) Then read the comprehensive discussion of the issue in Abravanel's commentary to Genesis 2:23, where he argues against Ibn Ezra and claims that the proof is absolute. Also see *Sefer ha-Kuzari* 2:68.

Ramban's comment on Exodus 30:13, mentioned above in *Bi'ur Halakha*, was made in the context of a polemic against Rambam's position on Hebrew as *lashon ha-kodesh*. Rambam, though he often expressed his deep love for the Hebrew language, did not accept it as the Holy Tongue for magical or mystical reasons (see *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:8). Nor did he require or favor prayer in Hebrew for such reasons. His position was widely attacked, however. Even Ritva, who wrote *Sefer Zikaron* to defend Rambam from Ramban's criticisms, concluded that Rambam's definition of *lashon ha-kodesh* was "an error by the master." See Ya'akov Levinger, "Yihudo shel Yisrael, Artzo u-Leshono le-fi ha-Rambam," in *Mil'et 2* (Tel Aviv: Open University, 1984), pp. 294–297.

Rambam himself limited the validity of prayer in translation (despite the fact that the Mishna permits it), but he only did so for a completely non-mystical reason: see the sources listed in chapter nine, note 10.

is necessary for the *tikkun* [literally: fixing] of the many higher worlds and powers. . . .<sup>41</sup>

They were one hundred and twenty elders, among them several prophets.

And any intelligent person will understand that there is no man [left] on earth who is capable of making such a wonderful, awesome *tikkun* like this one, which incorporates the *tikkunim* of all the upper and lower worlds in one fixed, ordered form [*matbea*] of prayer in one *nosah*, such that each time we pray they cause new *tikkunim* in the arrangement of the worlds and the powers. . . .

This is impossible without the highest prophecy, and God's holy spirit, as when God appeared to them at the time of enacting the tefillot and the blessings. God put these exact words into their mouths, with all of the *tikkunim* hidden inside of them. . . .<sup>42</sup>

Clearly, the exact words are crucial for prayer according to Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin. A person's primary job when he prays is to recite the exact words, which have colossal effects on the sefirotic universes even without any *kavvana*. Although, as we described in chapter five, Rabbi Hayyim recommended that a person keep the "simple" *kavvanot* in mind as opposed to kabbalistic ones (because even the kabbalistic ones convey just a fraction of the deeper meaning of the precise words), the enormous difference between Rabbi Hayyim's idea of prayer and the "simple" view of prayer is obvious.

Nevertheless, Rabbi Hayyim's radical views on prayer, and others like it from the kabbalistic tradition, have been increasingly promoted to popular audiences in recent years. Mystical assumptions about the value of the prayer text are presented as "the" Jewish view on prayer. Another Artscroll publication on prayer introduced the *Amida* with "An Overview" entitled "The Prayer Code." The "code," of course, refers to the words of the siddur, whose deeper meaning has little to do with the plain sense of the words according to Lurianic kabbala. This Artscroll book, like the previous one, finds the clearest statement of this belief in the words of Rabbi Hayyim. Here is how the book explains that view to readers, many of whom undoubtedly have limited backgrounds in Judaism:

*Nefesh HaChaim* (II:13) emphasizes that the standard prayer text composed by the men of the Great Assembly is so powerful that even when the supplicant fails to pray with proper intent, feeling, and understanding, his words still have a great impact on the world.

This can be illustrated with a contemporary parable: Imagine, if you will, a spaceship hurtling at an incredible speed millions of miles away from this mother planet. At mission-control headquarters down on earth

41. *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* (Bnei Brak, 1989), 2:10. For a similar statement about the Men of the Great Assembly and their text, see *Noda Bihuda*, 4.

42. *Ibid.*, 2:13.

the spaceship is guided by a computer technician operating a control console. The computer operator knows nothing about spacecraft—he has never seen and will never see the vehicle he is now guiding. The operator doesn't even understand the top-secret, classified commands he is issuing, because every message is carefully encoded and only the spacecraft's computer can unscramble and decipher the secret orders. The computer operator knows only one thing—if he presses a few buttons and keys down below he makes important things happen in space! A few small numbers and letters on earth can change the space vehicle's course and destination by millions of miles.

*Tefillah* works in a similar fashion. It is a thrice daily transmission of cosmic proportions, broadcast by simple operators who are unaware of the far reaching power at their fingertips.

While the metaphor itself is crude, it does succeed in bringing out the vision underlying Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin's view of prayer for the contemporary reader. It brings home a point that is an entirely foreign idea to most Jews, and to most people who have anything to do with prayer. If *tefillah* indeed "works in a similar fashion" to a computer operator typing encrypted codes, then Jewish prayer is really a far cry from what most people think it is. It is certainly a very different thing from talking to God as one might talk to another person. This view undeniably represents a valid approach to prayer in the Jewish tradition. Yet the following question may still be asked: While Artscroll has every right to champion this view of prayer and popularize it, is it really the appropriate one to present to a popular audience? Out of the many legitimate and meaningful Jewish philosophies of prayer, why choose to stress this one?

Furthermore, the idea that prayer's main value is in the "great impact" made by recitation of its words in Hebrew, even without understanding or *kavvana*, leaves one feeling unsatisfied. It seems too ritualistic and not spiritual enough (despite the supposedly "spiritual" claim being made about the encoded meanings). This is probably what lead the very same book to later quote Rabbenu Bahya's famous statement that prayer without *kavvana* is like a body without a soul. That statement, of course, reflects an entirely different universe of thought about the meaning of prayer than the one quoted above. Rabbenu Bahya's kind of prayer has both simple and rationalistic elements, while Rabbi Hayyim's is fully part of the mystical tradition, and their two divergent approaches have extremely different ramifications for what "*kavvana*" means and what the value of prayer is. Despite the implicit contradiction between the two, Artscroll includes both views in the same book, though giving clear priority to the mystical view represented by Rabbi Hayyim and others. In short, Rabbi Hayyim's view that there is exactly one correct prayer text, that every word of that text has unknown mystical meanings, and that consequently no word may ever be changed—this, the most extreme view of all on the text of the siddur, is the

one that has become the most widely championed in contemporary Orthodox circles.<sup>43</sup>

However, it is a fact that several different versions of the siddur exist. (Perhaps Rabbi Hayyim thought that only one of these was the correct one.) And there is a different kabbalistic tradition that explicitly attempts to account for the existence of numerous versions of the siddur. This tradition was recorded for us by Rabbi Hayyim Vital in the name of his master, the Ari:

There are many differences in the *nosah* of the blessings and the tefillot between the prayer books, whether they be the customs of Sefarad, Italy, Ashkenaz, or others. About this issue my master of blessed memory told me that there are twelve windows in the sky, corresponding to the twelve tribes. Each and every tribe's prayer rises through the one particular window designated for it. This is the hidden meaning of the twelve gates mentioned at the end of Ezekiel (48:30–35).

Now there is no doubt that if the prayers of all the tribes were identical there would be no need for twelve windows and gates, each gate with its own path. Rather, it is certain that since their prayers are different, each and every tribe therefore needs a unique gate. This is because the order of prayer for any tribe must be according to the root and source of the souls of that tribe.

Therefore it is correct for each and every individual to hold fast to the order of prayer according to the custom of his fathers, since none of us knows who is from one tribe, and who is from another. Perhaps since his fathers kept a certain custom this means that he is from a particular tribe, for which that custom is appropriate. And if he now abandons it his prayer will not rise up without being according to that particular order.

But you must understand that all this is only regarding the various words in the middle of prayer and similar [minor] things, such as whether to say "*Hodu*" before "*Barukh she-Amar*" or after. But whatever is based on an explicit rule in the Talmud is applicable to everyone, and there is no difference among the tribes regarding these matters.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, saying the exact words is crucial. But instead of there being only one text with mystical powers, there are twelve. Each community must continue to use its own unique *nosah* of the prayers, because only that

43. It is not just one company, Artsroll, that is promoting this view. The trend in many publications aimed at yeshiva students is to explain the siddur as a code. See, for example, *Be-Rumo Shel Olam* (Jerusalem: Sifriyat Benei Torah, 1995).

44. *Sha'ar ha-Kavvanot: Sha'ar ha-Shishi Lishmonah She'arim*, 1 (Tel Aviv, 1962), p. 328 (in *Ynany Nosah ha-Tefilla*). Also see the introduction to *Ynany ha-Tefilla in Peri Etz Hayyim*, p. 15. *Magen Avraham on Orach Hayyim* 68 summarizes this view.

version can serve as a sort of mystical “key” to unlock its particular heavenly gate so that prayers can enter.

One major objection has been raised against the Ari’s theory. Rabbi Aryeh Leib Gordon, author of the introduction to the encyclopedic *Siddur Otzar ha-Tefillot*, asked an obvious question: What about the Levites? The kabbalistic idea of the “twelve gates to heaven” is based on the twelve gates to Jerusalem, one for each tribe, as described in Ezekiel 48. Now, Levi is one of those twelve tribes. But in every Jewish community throughout the world, the Levites (and the *Kohanim*) all use precisely the same text as the rest of the Jews in their communities! Therefore, concludes Rabbi Gordon, it is hard to understand how various versions of the siddur could derive from twelve original “tribal” prayer texts.<sup>45</sup>

Gordon also noted that kabbalists in the tradition of the Vilna Gaon and his students did not seem to accept this “tribal” theory. Neither the Vilna Gaon nor his students ever mention it in their writings; on the contrary, Rav Hayyim of Volozhin wrote that there is only *one* correct text (not twelve), as we saw above.<sup>46</sup> All of this led Gordon to doubt the validity of this Lurianic tradition.

The discussion does not end here, however. It is in the writings of the early hasidic masters in the eighteenth century that we find an implicit answer to Gordon’s question. Rabbi Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezhirech, was one of the earliest figures to urge eastern European hasidic Jews to abandon the traditional Ashkenazic siddur in favor of what was thought to be Rabbi Isaac Luria’s version. Here is his reason:

The idea of prayer is for each one to rise through its own gate, for prayer is like a ladder set in the ground whose top reaches heaven. Each gate has unique combinations, thus there are different texts.

Now the thirteenth gate is for anyone who doesn’t remember his tribe, and doesn’t know through which gate he may enter the King’s court. . . . Now the godly man, the Ari of blessed memory, since all

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45. *Siddur Otzar ha-Tefillot* vol. 1, (New York, 1946), pp. 156a–b. Gordon was not the first to raise this question: *Hatam Sofer* raised it before him in reply to those influenced by the Maggid of Mezhirech. See the source referred to below, note 49.

46. On whether the Vilna Gaon (or by implication his closest student, Rabbi Hayyim) ever disagreed with the Ari, see Lamm, *ibid.*, pp. 19–21, 45–47.

It is possible that Rabbi Hayyim was indirectly questioning the Lurianic tradition when he wrote, “The fact that a few of the *kavvanot* of prayer were revealed to us from [the time of] our holy and exalted early rabbis until the last great master, the awesome and holy man of God, the Ari of blessed memory—these are not comparable to a drop in the sea compared to the deep inner *kavvana* of the *Anshei Knesset ha-Gedolah* who established the prayers” (quoted above). His point here may be that even the Ari’s tremendous knowledge of the kabbalistic meanings of the prayer text was dwarfed by that of the *Anshei Knesset ha-Gedolah* who wrote the prayers themselves. Therefore, their words may contain meanings that even the Ari did not know, and Jews should not give special credence to any particular text based on his opinions.



the paths of heaven were clear to him, he gave advice to whoever does not remember his tribe, and set an order of prayer selected from several different texts, as scholars are aware.

One may ask what need there is for thirteen gates since the thirteenth gate includes all of the rest and should be sufficient [by itself]. The answer is that when every tribe was known, as well as the *nosah* for each tribe, it was certainly better for each to enter through its own gate. . . . However in this time, when the tribes and the *nosah* for each tribe are not known, one should adopt the custom of the Ari of blessed memory, which is equally good for all. . . .<sup>47</sup>

The idea that Jews have entirely forgotten their tribal identities answers Gordon's question. The reason Levites and *Kohanim* use the same siddur as the rest of the Jews in their communities is because they have lost their true *nosah*, just as all other Jews have. Though the Maggid of Mezhibezh didn't state this explicitly, others did realize that his argument solved the problem why Levites share the same text as other Jews. The text is slightly different in most printed versions of *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'akov*, and in some there is a parenthetical remark interpolated into the text of the Maggid's words as follows:

However, in this time, when the tribes are not known (The proof for this is that we have *Kohanim* and Levites amongst us, and how could we all have the same *nosah*?), every man must therefore adopt the custom of the Ari of blessed memory, which is equally good for all.<sup>48</sup>

This is a striking example of how a *hasid* (who printed the Maggid's book) and a *mitnagged* (a non-*hasid*, Rabbi Gordon) arrived at opposite conclusions based on precisely the same observation. Both realized that Levites share the same prayer texts as all other Jews. For Rabbi Gordon, this meant that the "tribal" theory of multiple texts must not be true. But for the anonymous *hasid*, since the existence of "tribal" traditions was undoubtedly true, the fact that Levites no longer possess one is a sure indication that they must have been entirely lost. The conclusion for hasidim was, therefore, that all Jews should adopt the Lurianic siddur since it was the "master key" to unlock the heavens for the prayers of Jews who could not enter any of the specific tribal gates.<sup>49</sup>

47. This translation is based on Rivka Shatz-Uffenheimer's critical edition of *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'akov* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1976), pp. 167–168. In her edition this is section 96, but in others it is 133.

48. Ibid. Uffenheimer points out in her note that the first printed edition contains the parenthesis. Later editions have it, too. I used the edition published in honor of the Maggid's 200th *yahrzeit* by the Lubavitcher Kehot society (New York, 1972).

49. The hasidic emphasis *nosah sefarad* inspired a lively debate among later *posekim* about when (if ever) it is permissible for one to change his *nosah*. The entire debate was based on the assumption that the exact wording of prayer texts is

Rabbi Hayyim Vital, Ari's student, did not write that there was a "master key." On the contrary, he wrote that "it is correct for each and every individual to hold fast to the order of prayer according to the custom of his fathers, since none of us knows who is from one tribe, and who is from another." But Rabbi Hayyim Yosef David Azulai (Hida, 1724–1806), a Sephardic kabbalist and halakhist of great renown, wrote in Ari's name that "prayer in the *nosah* of the Sephardim can enter any of the twelve gates."<sup>50</sup> He obviously meant the *nosah* of Ari himself, who substantially adopted the Sephardic *nosah* even though his father was Polish. In any case, Hida corroborated the claim that Ari indeed thought of his own *nosah* as the "master key."

crucial, since the words and even the individual letters encode a mystical meaning with much deeper significance than their literal meaning suggests. The fact that most *rishonim* besides Rambam allow or even encourage changing the words of prayer texts is never considered or even mentioned by the parties to this debate. But if an exact text must be recited, the question of which text should be chosen still remained.

Hasidic *posekim* permit an Ashkenazic Jew to change to *nosah sefarad* because they consider it to be the "master key" which allows the prayers of any Jew to enter heaven regardless of which tribe he is descended from. On the other hand, non-Hasidic authorities (*mitnaggedim*) unanimously forbid one to change from *nosah Ashkenaz* because he thereby violates his family tradition and (perhaps more severely) he will not be using the correct "key" any longer. In an exact reversal of the Hasidic *pesak*, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (*Iggerot Moshe, Orah Hayyim* 2, no. 24) permitted a Jew whose family uses *nosah Sefarad* to change to *nosah Ashkenaz* precisely because the latter was the original *nosah* of his family, as it originally was for all Ashkenazic Jews before the rise of Hasidut. But to change to *nosah Sefarad* would remain forbidden because every Jew remains bound by his traditional *nosah*.

The classic argument for the *mitnaggedic* view is found in *Teshuvot Hatam Sofer, Orah Hayyim* 15, 16 (no. 2), and the comments of his student Maharam Shik, *siman* 43. For the Hasidic response see *Divrei Hayyim* 12:8 and *Likkutei He'arot* on the Hatam Sofer (24b–29b). (Reading *Likkutei He'arot* is the most convenient way to study this topic because it quotes almost all of the relevant literature in full.) For a well-presented summary of the arguments in these *teshuvot*, listen to the audiocassette by Rabbi Yissocher Frand entitled "Terumah—Changing Nusach" (no date). I am grateful to Rabbi Frand for the above references.

In addition to Rabbi Frand's sources, see *Piskei Uziel be-She'elot ha-Zeman* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kuk, 1970), pp. 17–18. Rabbi Uziel argues that it is permitted to change a custom as long as no issue of prohibition (*devar issur*) is involved. He quotes sources to the effect that changing *nosah* involves no prohibition and is permitted for this reason. Maharshdam held this position (*Responsa, Orah Hayyim* 35) and is quoted approvingly in the most comprehensive discussion ever written on this issue (but one that is unfortunately marred by cultural bias); see *Yabia Omer*, vol. 6 (10).

Finally, it should be emphasized once more that the debate on changing *nosah* that began with *Hatam Sofer* entirely ignores the liberal stance towards changing the text held by almost all *rishonim*. This should be a reminder of how strong the influence of kabbala has been on the development of prayer, even when its major thrust is contrary to that of the halakha.

50. *Kesher Gadol* 12:9, cited in *Yabia Omer*, vol. 6 (10:1).

Whether a kabbalist believes that there is one valid *nosah* or twelve (or even thirteen), it is the exact recitation of a precise text that remains important. But as we made clear throughout this chapter, there is little basis for this claim in rabbinic literature. However, there are two “proofs” that kabbalists often cite in this regard. Though neither is conclusive, it is important to be aware of them in order to better appreciate the kabbalistic claim.

The first kabbalistic proof is similar to the remark by Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin that we cited above: “It wasn’t for nothing that one hundred and twenty elders, many of whom were prophets, were needed to establish a small petition, a short prayer like this one [the *Amida*]. On the contrary, they had deep wisdom through their holy spirits and their exalted prophetic inspiration.” In other words, Rabbi Hayyim claimed that the *Amida* is not striking in terms of its surface meaning; almost anyone could compose such a prayer. So why were “elders” and “prophets” necessary? It must be because the true value of the *Amida* is in the mystical effects created by saying its exact words.

Similar sentiments were expressed by others, who based them more closely on the Talmud.<sup>51</sup> Rabban Gamliel is reported to have asked: “Is there no one who knows how to establish *Birkat ha-Minim* (the blessing of the heretics)?” at which point “Shemuel ha-Katan rose and established it” (*Berakhot* 28b; the reference is to the creation of the “nineteenth” blessing of the *Amida*, which asks God to crush sinners and informers). Obviously, the creation of this short blessing was accompanied by a great deal of fanfare. But why was it so hard to “establish” it? Those who accept the kabbalistic view answer that the great importance the Talmud accords to the creation of this short, seemingly simple blessing is proof of the fact that all blessings have deep kabbalistic meanings, and can only be composed by extraordinary men who know the secrets of the Torah. That is why Rabban Gamliel was so concerned about who would “establish” *Birkat ha-Minim*.

However, the proof is not conclusive. The Talmud is unclear about why the creation of this blessing was accompanied by so much deliberation. We will never know the reason for sure. But it seems likely that the importance accorded to the creation of *Birkat ha-Minim* had more to do with its dangerous and controversial theme than with its exact text. Though we can never know the actual historical background with certainty, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kuk learned a beautiful lesson from this passage. He similarly asked why it was so hard to compose a “curse” against the heretics who oppressed the rabbis, and this was his answer: Whenever one “establishes” a new practice, it must be done entirely out of concern for what is right and good for the Jewish people, for doing God’s will. It is forbidden to mix in any personal biases. But when it came to *Birkat ha-Minim*, there was an understandable worry that some of the rabbis would want to curse the heretics and informers for their own personal benefit. Shemuel ha-Katan

51. See *Pnei Yehoshua* on *Berakhot* 28b and Hida, *Responsa Hayyim She’al* 2:11; both of these, and other similar arguments, are quoted in *Yabia Omer*, vol. 6 (12:5).

was chosen to initiate the prayer because he was free from personal animosities; his motto was "Do not rejoice when your enemy falls" (*Avot* 4:24). Thus, the deeper message of the talmudic passage is that one may not even hate sinners on a personal level.<sup>52</sup> Underlying Rav Kuk's beautiful idea is that the theme of *Birkat ha-Minim* is what caused so much trouble, and not its exact text.

Champions of kabbalistic prayer also offer a "halakhic" proof that exact prayer texts matter. The Talmud Yerushalmi records that Rabbi Yose sent a message to the Babylonian Jews: "Even though we sent you the order of the festivals (*seder mo'adot*) do not change from the custom of your fathers" (*Eruvin*, end of chap. 3). When read in context, this simply seems to mean that the Jews outside of Israel should continue to observe a second day of holidays (*yom tov sheni shel galuyot*). But one version of the text has "order of the prayers" (*seder tefillot*) instead of "order of the festivals." Even this version proves nothing about reciting an exact text, and in context even *seder tefillot* could mean the prayers for the second days of holidays. But it was understood as referring to prayer texts by *Hagahot Maimoniyot* and *Magen Avraham*. The latter explicitly connected the passage to Ari's idea of twelve gates for the twelve tribes, and wrote that this is why the Babylonian Jews were urged not to "change the custom" of their fathers.<sup>53</sup>

In conclusion, all kabbalistic traditions stress the importance of reciting *some* exact text. Some held that there was only one such text, while Rabbi Isaac Luria posited that there were exactly twelve, and that ideally the members of different tribes should each use the siddur appropriate for themselves. Later, hasidism spread the idea that the hasidic siddur was the thirteenth text appropriate for any Jew, regardless of which tribe he belonged to.

This style of thinking eventually led to the creation of the siddur that has become known as *nosah Sefarad*. The Lurianic siddur was mostly based on the Sephardic siddur but not identical to it. (This is true even though Ari's father was an Ashkenazic Jew from Poland. The father married into a Sephardic family and Ari himself grew up in Egypt.) Since Ari had composed his mystical *kavvanot* according to the exact wording of his siddur, which was closest to the Sephardic custom, they were not directly applicable to Ashkenazim. The solution the early *hasidim* of eastern Europe decided on was to "adapt" the Ashkenazic siddur by adding phrases from the Lurianic text to it, and by changing the order of some prayers to the Lurianic custom. The result was a purely Ashkenazic creation which

52. *Siddur Olat Re'iyah*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, Mosad Harav Kuk, 1939), pp. 277–278.

53. *Magen Avraham* on *Orah Hayyim* 68. For a full discussion of the Yerushalmi passage, see *Yabia Omer*, vol. 6, 10:1. He cites Rabbi Yosef(?) Palaggi, who rejected *Magen Avraham's* opinion because there are no significant halakhic differences between the *nosha'ot*.

What is perhaps the best proof text for this position, however, is seldom quoted. I refer to the talmudic passage on the short prayer in a place of danger (*Berakhot* 29b), which was used by Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik to prove that only the fixed texts for prayer are valid. That passage and possible explanations of it were discussed fully in chapter six, note 28.

ironically became known as *nosah Sefarad*! The first scholar to edit *nosah Sefarad* was Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady, the first rebbe of the Habad (Lubavitch) Hasidim. He called his edition *nosah ha-Arizal*, and it is the prayer text of Lubavitcher Hasidim to this day. It is also the chosen version of most Ashkenazic Israelis (even non-Lubavitchers) who use *nosah Sefarad*.<sup>54</sup>

In short, it may be said that kabbalistic ideas about the words of prayer texts having essential sanctity have been responsible for the creation of three new versions of the siddur, all of which continue to be used today to some degree:

- (1) The Lurianic siddur, Ari's prayer text as recorded by Rabbi Hayyim Vital, is mostly based on the Sephardic siddur.
- (2) The hasidic siddur, popularly called *nosah Sefarad*, combines elements from the Lurianic siddur and from the traditional Ashkenazic siddur. Many editions of *nosah Sefarad* exist with dozens of minor differences between them.
- (3) *Nosah ha-Arizal*, the siddur of the Habad hasidim, is the most popular edition of *nosah Sefarad*. It was edited by the first rebbe of the Habad hasidic movement.

Another version of the siddur is based on the teachings of the Vilna Gaon. The text is based on both halakhic and kabbalistic criterion, as well as grammatical considerations. Called *nosah ha-Gra* (its most widespread edition is entitled *Siddur Ishei Yisrael*), it has only a few minor variations from the traditional Ashkenazic siddur. Since the Vilna Gaon's time the custom in the Land of Israel is for Ashkenazic Jews (besides those who use *nosah Sefarad* because of hasidic traditions) to use *nosah ha-Gra*. All siddurim of the "Ashkenaz" type newly published in Israel are *nosah ha-Gra*.

All of the above applies exclusively to Ashkenazim, but the Jews of North Africa and the Middle East (and those descended from Spanish exiles five centuries ago) follow a basic *nosah* which is nowadays labelled the version of the *Edot ha-Mizrah*, or the Eastern communities. The Jews of Yemen have carefully preserved a third textual tradition they call the *Tiklal*. It is only among Ashkenazic Jews that individuals and groups made massive and purposeful changes in prayer texts, changes that resulted in a controversy that has lasted for centuries and has still not ended.

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54. The popular Israeli *Siddur Rinat Yisrael* is based on the Lubavitch *nosah ha-Arizal* in its *nosah Sefarad* edition, as is the "Unified Version" of the siddur distributed by the Israel Defense Forces. The majority of Ashkenazic synagogues in Israel use *nosah Sefarad*, and because of *Rinat Yisrael*'s popularity most have adopted the Habad *nosah* by default.

The adoption of *nosah Sefarad* in Israel derives from the *aliya* of the students of the Ba'al Shem Tov in the late eighteenth century. But Ashkenazic communities with non-hasidic roots (known as the *perushim*) use the Vilna Gaon's edition of the standard *nosah Ashkenaz* instead. This also is a result of customs brought to Eretz Yisrael by his students when they came on *aliya* after the turn of the century.

## AN HALAKHIC COMPROMISE

Some medieval authorities who did assume that Hazal composed exact words for the blessings were bothered by the fact that the halakha allows a pray-er great flexibility in regard to the words he recites. Ritva summed up this conflict well:

The *nosah* of any blessing is of rabbinic origin, and wherever they didn't specifically forbid it, there is no objection to changing a word. Whether one changes words or adds them there is no objection, as long as he doesn't plan to do this regularly [*be-derekh keva*]. Because if changing words meant that a person has not fulfilled his obligation, then the rabbis should have written the *nosah* of the blessings and recorded the number of words!

And that which they said, "where they said to be lengthy one may not be short, and where they said to be short one may not lengthen"—they meant that one must not plan to do this regularly. But even if he did so [regularly]—he has still fulfilled his obligation to pray. And this is why we have the custom to say liturgical poems in the middle of the blessings of *keri'at Shema* and tefilla, and scholars do not object . . .<sup>55</sup>

Remember that when Rashba noted the Talmud's lack of a prayer text, he wrote that it was because Hazal never composed words for them in the first place. But Ritva, who assumed that they did, was forced to conclude that they still did not mind people changing them. This in turn raised a further question: Why did the rabbis compose exact words for the blessings in the first place if they allowed people to change them anyway? Ritva's answer (unlike Rashba's) was that such change is only allowed temporarily. Re'ah arrived at exactly the same conclusion, and also justified adding *piyyutim* in the same way. Maharal of Prague accepted this ruling in the sixteenth century, similarly allowing temporary textual changes and the addition of *piyyutim* by claiming that "to continually lengthen in a place where they said to be short is not permitted . . . but to lengthen occasionally is not considered lengthening since it is not obligatory" (*Netiv ha-Avoda*, chapter 7).

Thus, we have a compromise position: When the rabbis allowed innovation in the words of the blessings, they only did so as long as their "official" text would remain the standard text to be used on a regular basis. Innovations could be made, but only on an ad hoc basis.<sup>56</sup> This view

55. *Hiddushei ha-Ritva*, p. 100.

56. According to *Arukh ha-Shulhan*, this is "obviously" the rule about adding personal requests during *Shemoneh Esrei*: Hazal only allowed additions to their version on a temporary basis. He wrote:

To add a constant, fixed prayer during the *Shemoneh Esrei* shows great arrogance and impudence towards the Men of the Great Assembly! And any scholar who has the fear of God within him will agree to this. Therefore it is important to argue against the publishers who have added a fixed prayer in

accepts the legitimacy of *hiddush* as long as no permanent damage is done to the structure (and length) of the blessings.

When this "compromise" position is combined with the views of those who denied the very existence of an "official" prayer text, it becomes clear that the overwhelming majority of medieval halakhists accepted (or encouraged) personal innovation in the texts of rabbinic blessings. Both Ashkenazic and Sephardic scholars permitted changing words. However, the exceptions were the two greatest and most influential minds in the history of rabbinic scholarship, namely Rashi (for Ashkenazic Jewry), and Rambam (for Sephardic Jewry), both of whom opposed textual changes.<sup>57</sup>

In Ashkenaz, the practice of adding *piyyutim* was so strong that it eventually led Rabbenu Tam to make a forced re-interpretation of the mishna in order to allow *piyyut*, as we saw earlier in this chapter.<sup>58</sup> The lenient approach was eventually accepted for Ashkenazic Jewry by the *Tur* (at least in principle), and in practice by Rema.<sup>59</sup>

In Sephardic lands the practice of reciting *piyyutim* during the blessings was also very strong, but it was eventually overcome by Rambam's fierce opposition to textual changes accommodating *piyyut*, a view that was eventually codified by Rabbi Yosef Karo in his *Shulhan Arukh*. However, even Sephardic Jews who generally follow Rabbi Yosef Karo's rulings should pause to consider that textual changes were permitted by authorities from Saadya Gaon to almost all of the *rishonim* from Spain, North Africa, and Provence.<sup>60</sup> (The only major exception was of course Rambam.) In short, using one's own words in blessings has solid halakhic foundations. Doing so is justified not just because "there are those who permit it" (*yesh 'al mi lismokh*), but because the major thrust of the halakhic discussion unequivocally supports it. Furthermore, all authorities without exception agree that such changes are valid after the fact (*bedi'avad*) if the new words still match the overall theme of the blessing.

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the *siddurim* in the middle of *shema` kolenu*. . . . Many ignorant people say this all the time during every *Shemoneh Esrei*. . . .

He continues by urging people to say their extra petitions after finishing *Shemoneh Esrei* (*Orah Hayyim* 119:2, based on *Magen Avraham*).

57. However, it is not definite that even Rashi himself was so strict; see above, note 14.

58. For the references on Rabbenu Tam's opinion and its fate, see notes 15 and 16 above.

59. *Orah Hayyim* 68; for a fuller discussion of the decision-making process on changing texts in the *Tur* and the *Shulhan Arukh*, see chapter nine, note 9, below.

60. In Spain: Abudarham, Rashba, Ritva, Ran, Rashbetz, and Rabbenu Yonah [on *Rif Berakhot* 5b]; in North Africa: Rabbenu Hannanel; in Provence: Meiri and Ra'avad (quoted in *Shiltei Gibborim* A on *Alfasi Berakhot* 5a). Rabbenu Yonah and Meiri, whom we did not mention earlier, both cited Rabbenu Tam's arguments approvingly. On Saadya and other *geonim*, see note 9 above.

In terms of practical implications for those who follow Rabbi Yosef Karo, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef cites (and accepts) several of these views that changing words in the blessings is permissible and not considered a *shinnui matbea*; see the next note.

### A SUMMARY OF THE VIEWS ON AN "OFFICIAL TEXT" FOR PRAYER

At this point it should be clear that there are two basic approaches to the rigidity of the texts of the blessings. What should be thought of as the "halakhic" approach, which we just finished outlining, derives from the basic talmudic texts. Since halakhic texts generally allow a great deal of innovation in prayer, some halakhists concluded that no "official" text was ever composed by the rabbis. Others, who did assume that such a text existed, still admitted that an individual Jew was allowed to pray in his own words on an *ad hoc* basis. For both positions, the fact that Hazal did not count the words of the blessings makes sense, because the exact text is not crucial to fulfilling one's obligation to pray.<sup>61</sup>

The kabbalistic approach, on the other hand, assumes that prayer's primary value lies in the spiritual power of its words and its letters. This made it impossible to imagine that reciting a precise text wasn't necessary. Unlike Rashba and Ritva, the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* never asked why Hazal didn't record the number of words for the blessings. Instead, they counted for themselves! There is no doubt that mystical beliefs about the power of the words of prayer were a major force in the standardization of the text of the siddur.

The approach of Rabbi Ya'akov Emden, which idealized the supposed original text of the rabbis without necessarily attributing mystical value to it, also belongs in this category. By emphasizing that prayer *par excellence* means, by definition, the precise recitation of a specific text that must be preserved at all costs, he minimized the freedom that Hazal encouraged in prayer. The same view is prominent in the kabbala, and thus it is not surprising when he notes how "the Zohar, too, was involved" in counting the words of blessings.

It should now be obvious that the post-talmudic debate on whether rabbinic prayer means the recitation of one "official" text covered a very wide spectrum. (It may certainly be said that, over the centuries, the discussion has been much more colorful than the two options in the Heinemann/Finkelstein debate!) But what, then, is the "traditional" or "Torah" view on whether or not the rabbis of the Talmud actually composed the exact words of our prayers and expected us to use them? From what we have learned we must conclude that there is no single correct "Torah" view on this matter. Actually, there are actually at least eight possibilities which together form an entire spectrum of opinion:

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61. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef cited a number of these views in *Yabia Omer*, vol. 2 (12:18), where he justified adding the phrase *berit ve-Torah* to the blessing of *me'en shalosh* because it matches the theme of the blessing; such small changes in the body of the blessing do not constitute changing the *matbea*. The sources quoted mean this to be the case *lekhatheilla*.

It is not clear to me, however, whether Rabbi Yosef was bothered by the implicit contradiction between these sources (which place no emphasis on the exact words) and the ones he quoted later in vols. 3 (13:4), 5 (12:5), and 6 (10) about kabbalistic notions of the fixed text (whereby prayer loses its primary value without saying the official Hebrew *nosah*). Perhaps he will make his views on this issue clear in future writings.



- (1) Hazal never composed "official" texts of the blessings. They allowed people to speak to God in their own words within a general framework (Rashba, Abudarham).
- (2) Hazal may have composed words for the blessings at first, but they never meant this to serve as an "officially binding" text (Rashbetz).
- (3) Hazal did compose an "official text," but had no objection to people modifying it on a temporary basis (Ritva, Re'ah, Maharal).
- (4) It is not explicitly forbidden to change words in the "official text," but it is not fitting to do so purposely. Since Hazal did compose texts for the blessings, their texts are the ones that should be used (Rambam).
- (5) The original text that Hazal composed was meant to be preserved and recited in its exact form. If possible, we are obligated to determine the original text and to use only it (Rabbi Ya'akov Emden).
- (6) Hazal chose every word and letter with great care, and each symbolizes important concepts to those who know their meaning. Thus, the prayers should ideally be recited in their exact form. Yet those who are not educated should still pray in a language that they understand (*Hasidei Ashkenaz*).
- (7) Each of the twelve tribes has its own gate to heaven, and each gate is unlocked by a particular combination of words. Thus there are twelve "correct" texts, but each person may only use the one that is proper for him (Ari).
- (8) The Men of the Great Assembly composed one correct text which must be adhered to exactly. "Every word has effects in ways that we cannot understand . . . every word is essential, separately and in the context of the entire prayer" (based on *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*).

The first three options listed here preserve the halakha's desire for people to innovate with their own words in prayer. The overwhelming majority of medieval halakhists belonged to this school of thought, as we saw earlier. The fourth opinion (Rambam) recommends always using a standard text, but does not ascribe any extraordinary value (such as kabbalistic meanings) to reciting that text. The last four idealize, in one way or another, the "correct" words for a person to recite. It is certain that, in practice, the latter group of opinions has constituted the dominant force since the end of the middle ages. This view is what accounts for the countless times that later authorities refer to "the *nosah* that the Men of the Great Assembly established" as a matter of course.<sup>62</sup>

What conclusions can we draw from this discussion? First, it must be stated that history is not decided by majority vote. There is no official *pesak*

62. The *aharonim* often mention the *nosah she-tikkenu anshei kneset ha-gedolah* (or some similar phrase) in their writings. However, it is crucial to note that the talmudic passages on which this phrase is modelled do not actually use the word *nosah*! See *Berakhot* 33a, for instance, among the other similar statements quoted by Heinemann, *Ha-Tefilla*, p. 17.

Perhaps the word *nosah* crept in based on Rambam's usage in *Hilkhot Berakhot* 1:5.

(authoritative halakhic ruling) for historical truth. Even though most authorities assumed that Hazal composed some sort of a text (whether or not they meant it to be unchanging), this does not mandate belief in an "official" text. One may arrive at his own conclusions based on the evidence in the Talmud.

Secondly, there is no halakhic prohibition to using one's own words in a blessing, as long as they relate to the topic of that blessing. All *rishonim* (medieval halakhists) without exception agreed that one fulfils his obligation even if he uses his own words in the blessings. Most (except for Rambam) considered textual innovations (such as *piyyutim*) to be fully permissible, even praiseworthy, as long as they did not become permanent additions to the text. Kabbalistic objections can easily be raised to changing words in the tefillot, but it is difficult to mandate an unchanging text based solely on halakhic criterion.

It is true that many Jews today (especially hasidim) use kabbalistic approaches to reach deep levels of *kavvana* while always reciting the exact text of the siddur. That, of course, is both wonderful and praiseworthy, and such Jews can afford to remain unaffected by the more flexible positions described in this chapter. But for other observant Jews, the kabbala's uncompromising view on the text of the siddur contributes to a terrible loss of meaning in prayer. (We will discuss this practical loss at greater length in chapters eleven and twelve.) All I have tried to show here is that an alternative approach to the siddur, one that views the tefillot as open to personal expression and takes Hazal's encouragement of *hiddush* seriously, has a valid basis as well. This approach deserves the serious consideration of any Jew who feels a deep need to improve his *kavvana*.

### INFORMAL PRAYER IN JUDAISM

It would be wrong to close this chapter without noting that besides the flexibility the halakha allows within the obligatory blessings, Hazal ascribed religious value to voluntary, informal prayer (*tefillat reshut*) as well.<sup>63</sup> Earlier we mentioned that at the conclusion of the formal blessings of *Shemoneh Esrei*, a person can and should make a personal petition even if "he comes to say something as [lengthy as] the Yom Kippur service." Some such personal "prayers after the prayer" by the *amoraim* (rabbis from the period of the gemara) are actually recorded in the Talmuds,<sup>64</sup> and a few of them were eventually incorporated into the siddur. (Thus, they ironically became part of the *fixed* prayers!) For instance, the prayer *Elokai Netzor*, which is printed in siddurim after *Shemoneh Esrei*, was originally the

63. Chapter 7, "Tefillat ha-Yahid u-Tefillat ha-Reshut," in Heinemann, *Ha-Tefilla*, pp. 99–120. Also see "Yahid ve-Tzibbur ba-Tefilla (Bitkufat ha-Tanna'im v'ha-Amora'im)" in Heinemann, *Iyyunei Tefilla*, pp. 171–172.

64. Personal prayers are recorded in *Berakhot* 17a; *Yerushalmi Berakhot* 4:2. Also see how the rabbis expressed the feelings of Abraham and Moses in the language of prayer in *Yerushalmi Ta'anit* 2 (Abraham) and *Devarim Rabba* 11 (Moses).

personal petition to God of one talmudic sage (Mar the son of Ravina) at the conclusion of his obligatory prayers.

These free prayers were actually forerunners of what we now call *Tahanun*. After the formal prayer of the community (i.e., the *Shemoneh Esrei*), the rabbis encouraged individuals to bow down and plead with God in their own words to grant them their personal needs (this is why *Tahanun* is called *nefillat apayim*, "falling on one's face").<sup>65</sup> It is both ironic and sad that *Tahanun* has become the essence of fixed prayer today: not only have specific texts been chosen for it, but it is frequently one of the most rushed parts of *Shaharit*; people read through it at ridiculous speeds so that they can finish saying all of the words in the short time allowed before kaddish. Few observant Jews today would be bold enough to plead with God in their own words during *Tahanun* in place of what is printed in the siddur.

In almost every age people composed private prayers in their own words.<sup>66</sup> Rabbi Nathan Natta Hannover, who is best known as the chronicler of the Ukrainian massacres of the Jews in 1648 and subsequent years, also wrote a collection of original prayers called *Sha'arei Tziyyon*; several of his prayers were later incorporated into the siddur. *Hasidut*, which greatly emphasized prayer, produced such figures as Rabbi Levy Yitzhak of Berditchev and Rabbi Nahman of Breslov,<sup>67</sup> who encouraged Jews to pour out their hearts to God in their own words.

Such prayers became especially popular among women, who weren't considered obligated to recite the fixed prayers. In fact, some of them were written by women. An entire genre of informal prayer known as the *tehinot* was eventually formed; these were written in simple Hebrew or in vernaculars that common Jews understood, such as Judeo-Arabic<sup>68</sup> and most of all in Yiddish.<sup>69</sup> The *tehinot* express love and fear of God in simple prose, yet

65. On the development of *Tahanun* see Heinemann, *Ha-Tefilla*, *ibid*; S. B. Freehoff, "The Origin of the Tahanun," *HUCA* 2 (1925): 339 ff.

For the practical halakhot regarding *nefillat apayim* (bowing) after *Shemoneh Esrei*, see *Orah Hayyim* 131. *Arukh Ha-Shulhan* has a nice summary of the development of these halakhot and their sources. He makes it clear that while saying *tahanunim* has been accepted as an obligation in our times, the specific texts to be recited are only based on *minhag* [custom].

66. On these prayers, see the wonderful presentation by S. Haggai, "Ha-Dim'ah ha-Zakkah shel ha-Tehina," *Mahanayim* XC (1960): 113–120. This beautiful article is an excellent survey of free Jewish prayer in later periods, and complements Heinemann's thorough analysis of informal prayer in talmudic times.

67. See the introduction to *Likkutei Tefillot* (New York: Breslov Research Institute, 1976). *Likkutei Tefillot*, a collection of informal prayers on hundreds of topics based on Rabbi Nahman's teachings, has been reprinted numerous times. It is now available in a Hebrew/English edition accompanied by an extensive introduction to Rabbi Nahman's views on prayer and a justification of informal private prayer. See *The Fiftieth Gate: Likutey Tefilot*, trans. Avraham Greenbaum (New York: Breslov Research Institute, 1992).

68. Haggai, *ibid*. A collection of *tehinot* in Judeo-Arabic was printed as *Sefer Tziyyoren Shamir* (Djerba, Tunisia, 1940).

69. Recently, there has been revival of sorts for Yiddish *tehinot*, which are being

(to this pray-er, at least) they are usually a great deal more inspiring than the work of the great religious poets (*payyetanim*) of the Middle Ages. The elaborate techniques and complicated imagery of the *payyetanim* are almost always very impressive, but despite these features (and often because of them!) they often fail to convey any meaningful message from the average pray-er to God. It is arguable that they are unsurpassed as poetry, but as prayers the *piyyutim* pale in comparison to the sincerity, simplicity, modesty, and pure love of God that are expressed with such clarity in the *tehinot*. People (usually women) who said *tehinot* pleaded to God for help in all areas of life: they often asked God for simple things, such as for the *kugel* not to burn in the oven. And they asked Him for larger blessings such as health and prosperity, not in order to live in comfort, but so that they and their families could better devote their days to mitzvot and to Torah study. They asked that their children be born healthy and grow to be kind, generous and God-fearing Jews who study the Torah and live according to its principles. They prayed for *shalom bayit* (marital harmony), as well as for God to return His presence to Jerusalem.

It is striking that in our own generation, informal prayer has been entirely abandoned. No traditional Jewish community today (with the possible exception of the Breslover hasidim) stresses *tefillat reshut* as a value. Whatever original prayers have been composed recently, such as those for the State of Israel and its army, or new Kinnot memorializing the Holocaust, are all meant to become part of the *fixed* liturgy. But religious Jews today are rarely (perhaps never?) encouraged or taught to speak to God *on their own*, in their own words, as part of their prayers.

Like their unyielding demand for *kavvana*, which we studied in chapter two, informal prayer is yet another example of an aspect of prayer that Hazal considered not just permissible but *essential*, and that nevertheless has been abandoned in practice. In chapter eleven we'll discuss some possible historical reasons as to why Jewish prayer became increasingly rigid.

## TECHNICAL NOTE ON ADDING PETITIONS\*

My claim that the only essential halakha governing addition of petitions to the *Amida* is that the petition match the theme of the blessing requires

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collected and republished, sometimes accompanied by translations into modern Hebrew or English. For translations to Hebrew see *Ateret Rivka*, ed. Meir Vender (Jerusalem: Privately Published, 1992) which includes an ethical tract in Yiddish by a woman author and a Hebrew essay about the author.

For Yiddish/English editions see Rivka Zakutinsky, *Tehinas: A Voice from the Heart* (New York, 1992); Tracy Guren Klirs, *The Merit of our Mothers: A Bilingual Anthology of Jewish Women's Prayer* (Cincinnati: HUC, 1992). The latter has some remarks about female authorship of *tehinot* on pp. 3–5.

An Italian Jewish husband wrote his wife a book of prayers for life cycle occasions in Hebrew and Italian; see Nina Beth Cardin, *Out of the Depths I Call to You: A Book of Prayers for the Married Jewish Woman* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1992).

A new edition entirely in Yiddish is *Sefer Tehina Sara Rachel* (New York, 1992).

\*This section is meant for readers with a strong background in halakha.

detailed justification. This is because many people who study *Orah Hayyim* 119 in the *Shulhan Arukh* get the impression that matching the theme of a blessing is *not* the only essential limitation on adding petitions, and that adding requests to the middle blessings of *Shemoneh Esrei* is actually governed by a number of complicated rules.

Indeed, Rabbi Yosef Karo, the *Mehaber*, mentioned more limitations in the name of Rabbenu Yonah. But the fact that the *Mehaber* deviated from his normal procedure and mentioned Rabbenu Yonah by name, as opposed to quoting the opinion anonymously, is meant to point out that in principle the law does *not* follow him. Rather, the quotation constitutes a stringency that it is admirable, but not obligatory, to follow. He wrote this explicitly in his *Beit Yosef* on the *Tur* (119).

This is only one of numerous instances where those who study and decide halakha directly from the text of the *Shulhan Arukh* and its commentaries, rather than first researching the primary sources, are led to erroneous conclusions. (For another example of this, see the issue of "making up" *pesukei de-zimra*, discussed in chapter twelve, note 12.) The *Mehaber* himself only meant the *Shulhan Arukh* to be a concise summary of his conclusions for review, but not to be a code that others would rely on instead of consulting his previous writings or those of others! (On this, see the introductions to *Beit Yosef*, the *Shulhan Arukh*, and *Mishna Berura*. On the importance of deciding halakha from the Talmud instead of relying on halakhic codes, see Maharal of Prague, *Netivot Olam*, *Netiv ha-Avoda* chap. 15.) The historical controversy that surrounded the appearance of the *Shulhan Arukh* is a broad issue that need not be discussed further here, since it is not directly relevant to our topic. But a full understanding of the opinions on this issue of adding petitions to *Shemoneh Esrei* is crucial in order to justify the entire idea of reintroducing *hiddush* to prayer. Therefore I will present them here in an organized fashion. This excursion can be used as an introduction and a guide for those who want to study the halakhic issue in depth, so that they can do so more easily. The lengthy excursion is also necessary in order to fully justify my above statement. *However, since the upcoming digression will be complicated, I recommend that only readers with a good background in yeshiva study try to tackle it.*

The entire halakhic debate on adding requests revolves around the four statements in *Berakhot* 34a, that were quoted earlier. The question of whether there is a disagreement about some nuance of the law (according to Rav) is the essential problem here. According to Rabbenu Yonah each of the four statements adds another aspect to the laws of "adding" requests to *Shemoneh Esrei*, but according to most other *rishonim* (Rabbenu Hanannel, Rambam, Rosh, and *Tur*) this is not the case. Let us summarize the possible approaches to the problem taken by the commentaries on the *Tur*, first according to the majority opinion and then according to Rabbenu Yonah:

### According to the Majority of *Rishonim*:

1. *Beit Yosef* on the *Tur*: A person may add a request relating to the theme of the blessing for any of the middle blessings. For *Shomea Tefilla* he may

add a request for any kind of need, because the theme of this blessing is general. The same is certainly true at the end of *Shemoneh Esrei*, but only then can such private prayers be of extraordinary length.

When Rabbi Yehuda said in the name of Rav that this is done "at the end" of a blessing, he may have meant one of three things: (1) It doesn't make any difference where the additional request is made. Rav simply noted that, in general, people tend to add their own requests *after* they say the regular blessing; (2) Rav wanted to specifically point out that even before the conclusion of a blessing (*liatima*) it is permissible for a person to finish in his own words instead of the words of the rabbis; (3) Rav wanted to point out that a person should at least *start* the blessing in the words of the rabbis, but anywhere besides the very beginning of a blessing a person may add requests in his own words. This third explanation is in accordance with the opinion of Ri in *tosafot*, and *Tur Orah Hayyim* 566, both of whom justify adding lengthy *piyyutim* to the text of a blessing as long as you *start* the blessing with the usual words.

2. *Bah* on the *Tur*: There are two additional stringencies which *Beit Yosef* ignores. Rabbi Hiyya bar Ashi is not simply repeating the opinion of Rav Yehuda in the name of Rav, but making an essential new point: when he says that "if a member of his household is ill he should mention it in the Blessing for the Sick, and if he has monetary needs he should mention it in *Birkat ha-Shanim*" the "if" means that permission to add a personal petition is only granted when there is an *immediate need*. But it would not be permitted to ask God not to let a member of his household become sick, or not to ever take away his livelihood. This is only permitted in the general blessing of *Shomea` Tefilla*, where one may petition God about any matter.

Furthermore, when Rav Yehuda said that one may add a petition at the end of each blessing, he specifically meant that the addition must come after beginning the blessing with the regular text. (Thus, of the three possible explanations offered by *Beit Yosef*, *Bah* only considers the third one to be correct.) Unlike *Beit Yosef*'s ruling, according to *Bah* this limitation applies to *Shomea` Tefilla* as well.

3. *Derishah* on the *Tur*: The opinion that one may add petitions if he starts *me'en ha-berakhah* (see Ri in *tosafot* and *Tur* sect. 556) is interpreted too strictly by both *Beit Yosef* and *Bah*. *Me'en ha-berakha* doesn't mean that the blessing must start with the "official" words, but that the *beginning* of the petition must relate to the *theme* of the present blessing. Thus, one may add *piyyutim* or petitions at *any* point, and may even stray from the theme of the blessing, as long as he *starts* by addressing that theme. When Rav Tehudal bar Shilat said in the name of Rav that one may add *me'en kol berakhah* he meant that the theme of *all* the blessings, i.e., *any* petition, may be included in the additional petition for *any* blessing! And Rabbi Hiyya bar Ashi's point (in the name of Rav) is simply that it is preferable to add petitions to the blessing with a specifically related theme even though they could all be included in *Shomea` Tefilla* instead, without any limitations.

### According to Rabbenu Yonah:

*Beit Yosef*: The extra stringency required by Rabbenu Yonah is that a petition for an *individual* must be inserted in the *middle* of the text for any blessing, while a petition for the entire *community* can only be added at the *end* of a blessing's regular text. All of this is because rabbinic prayers themselves are in plural language ("Heal us . . ." etc.). Therefore, if a person adds a plural request in the middle of a blessing it will look like he is changing an "official" rabbinic text, but petitions for a specific individual in singular language would not pose this problem. *Plural* requests should thus be postponed until *after* the conclusion of the "official" text for any blessing. (*Beit Yosef* also notes Rabbenu Yonah's assumption that any petition for the public must always be done in plural language.)

None of these stringencies recommended by Rabbenu Yonah apply in the blessing of *Shomea` Tefilla*, because that blessing has a general theme and is "kosher" for all petitions, both in singular language and plural.

Adding *piyyutim* to the middle of a blessing ostensibly violates Rabbenu Yonah's rules because they employ plural language. Such additions can only be justified on the basis that *piyyutim* are *tzorkhei tzibbur* (public needs), not just an individual's needs. For the same reason, *piyyutim* are permitted in the first and last three blessings of *Shemoneh Esrei* even though all other additions are normally prohibited (*Tur Orah Hayyim* 112).

*Bah*: Rabbenu Yonah's stringencies apply to *Shomea` Tefilla* as well. If we worry that plural petitions may look like a change in the "official" text, why should this apply any less to *Shomea` Tefilla* (which itself is worded in the plural)? In fact, Rabbenu Yonah specifically wrote that in *Shomea` Tefilla* a person can ask about "any matter," but not that he can ask in "any language."

### Conclusion:

The *Tur* itself and all of the commentaries on it (*Beit Yosef*, *Bah*, and *Derishah*) make it fully clear that *me-ikkar ha-din* (in terms of a formal halakhic obligation) we don't follow the stringencies of Rabbenu Yonah. Given the overall topic of this chapter ("Prayer as a Fixed Text"), it is interesting to note that Rabbenu Yonah's worry about plural language petitions seeming to add to the "official" rabbinic text of blessings is only possible to understand if one assumes that such a text indeed existed! But most other *rishonim* such as Rambam, Rosh, and Rabbenu Hannanel are able to read the gemara in a way that does not require the existence of such a text.

As a matter of practical halakha, Rabbi Yosef Karo concludes in *Beit Yosef* that the simplest (and best) interpretation of the gemara does not follow Rabbenu Yonah, though "nevertheless it is good to take Rabbenu Yonah's opinion into account [*tov lahush le-divrei ha-Rabbenu Yonah*]." It is in this sense that he recorded Rabbenu Yonah's opinion in his *Shulhan Arukh*: as a good recommendation, but not as an obligation. Therefore, it seems that if a person will be "put off" or confused by Rabbenu Yonah's detailed rules and avoid *hiddush* because he's worried about them, he should instead rely

on the fact that halakha does not follow Rabbeinu Yonah and add whatever petitions he wishes, whether they are singular or plural, as long as they relate to the theme of the blessing. *Kavvana* and *hiddush* are more important than Rabbeinu Yonah's *humra* (stringency).

As far as the two idiosyncratic interpretations mentioned above that are not connected to Rabbeinu Yonah—the very strict one of *Bah* and the extremely liberal one in *Derisha*—neither of them seems to be relied upon by later *posekim*. In truth, *Bah*'s reading of the words "if a member of his household is ill" to mean that he may *only* add a petition if there is an immediate and present need for healing someone in your home seems to go beyond anything that the words clearly imply. Nor does his reference to Rashi make the point any stronger. It is simpler to claim, using talmudic phraseology, *urhah de-milleta nakat*, i.e., to say that Rabbi Hiyya bar Ashi simply assumed that in reality most people will usually add petitions when they themselves have an immediate and present need, but he did not mean that this is the only instance when such additions are allowed. This seems to be the way Rabbi Yosef Karo understood these words, as he never mentions this limitation anywhere. But surprisingly, *Peri Megadim* (*Eshel Avraham* on *Orah Hayyim* 119) says that the language of the *Mehaber* (!) implies only petitioning for immediate needs during the middle blessings, except for *Shomea Tefilla* when any request is permitted. He does not mention *Bah* at all. Now, the *Mehaber* simply mimics the language of Rabbi Hiyya bar Ashi (by way of the Rambam), and it is hard to see why any implications about his opinion (or Rambam's) should be drawn from this. *Peri Megadim*'s interpretation makes perfect sense in the context of *Bah*'s position that Rabbi Hiyya bar Ashi is purposely adding this new point in the name of Rav because it was left out by Rav Yehuda. But it does *not* fit *Beit Yosef*'s explicit statement that Rabbi Hiyya and Rav Yehuda both make exactly the same point (with the possible exception of Rav Yehuda's adding that petitions are appropriate at the end of blessings). Furthermore, *Bah* himself concluded that his very position constitutes a clear rejection of *Beit Yosef* and *Shulhan Arukh* on this issue! And lastly, *Beit Yosef* wrote that his conclusion follows the Rambam, whose language implies this limitation even less. (To see what I mean, read *Hilkhos Tefilla* 6:2–3 carefully. *Ve-khen* implies that adding to blessings may include any of the same kinds of material as after the *Amida*, but only in the appropriate blessing. Thus, *ketzad* is obviously meant to provide illustrative examples of *me'en ha-b'erakha* in the previous sentence, but not to limit its scope.) I find *Peri Megadim*'s inference here very problematic, which makes it likely that I have missed something. In any case, there is valid alternative to his interpretation of the *Mehaber*. *Ve-tzarikh iyyun*.

Finally, regarding *Derisha*'s substantial leniency for *piyyutim*, his understanding of the word *kol* seems difficult to justify in this context. But *Derisha* offered his view as a justification of the fact that *piyyutim* often include many ideas that go far beyond the topic of the blessing they are added to. This does, indeed, require justification, and it is possible that such additions may rely on an argument along his lines.



## Rambam on Prayer as a Fixed Text

### INTRODUCTION

In chapter eight I offered a brief summary of my conclusions about Rambam's opinion on using the "official" text for prayer. Here we will study his view in depth, and along the way we will discover how and why he differed from other medieval authorities who were less rigid about the texts of blessings. We shall see that the Talmud's ambiguities on this topic allow for two valid interpretations, which in turn justify two entirely different views of the origins of the fixed prayers.

To begin, we learned that the mishna (*Berakhot* 1:8) forbids "lengthening" or "shortening" a blessing. It also mandates specific "openings" and/or "closures" for each of the blessings. As we learned, there are two ways to interpret the mishna. Many commentators found two different rules in the mishna, namely: one may not add or subtract words in a blessing, nor may he change the "openings" or "closures."

Others, however, including Rambam, thought that the two statements in the mishna complemented each other. According to them, the meaning of "lengthening" or "closing" a blessing is to add a "closure" where one does not belong, or to omit one where it is called for. But the mishna does not prohibit changing the number of words in the text of a blessing.

Rambam follows this interpretation consistently, both in his *Commentary on the Mishna* and in *Mishneh Torah* (*Laws of Shema* 1:7). In the latter, when he discusses the rule requiring certain "openings" and "closings," he also invokes Rabbi Yose's objection to changing the *matbea'* of blessings (which we studied at the beginning of chapter eight):

These and all of the other blessings that are known to all of Israel were established by Ezra the Scribe and his court, and a person has no right to take away from them nor add to them.

Wherever they decreed to close with *Barukh* one has no permission not to close. In a place where they decreed not to close one may not close.

Wherever they decreed not to open [with *Barukh*] one has no

permission to open. In a place they decreed to open, one has no permission not to open.

In general, the rule is: Whoever changes from the form that the rabbis decreed [*kol ha-meshanneh mi-matbea' she-tave'u hakhamim*] for the blessings—he is in error, and he must say that blessing again in its [proper] form.

Here, *matbea'* clearly connotes a major aspect of the general format for blessings; specifically, it refers to the requirement to include “closures” or “openings” where they belong and to omit them where they do not. The term is borrowed from Rabbi Yose’s statement, but Rabbi Yose used it to object to Rabbi Meir’s new formulations for blessings, not to require “openings” and “closings.” Rambam borrowed the term from Rabbi Yose, and proceeded to apply it to any change in the general format for blessings.

Rambam also used the words “he is in error” rather than Rabbi Yose’s “he does not fulfil his obligation.” But both meant the same thing, as Rambam (like Rabbi Yose) concluded that the blessing is invalid and it must be repeated.

Now, Rambam’s ruling allows for the *possibility* that one may change the words in a blessing, as long as he retains the proper “openings” and “closures.” That, indeed, was Rashba’s conclusion, as we saw. However, though he did interpret this mishna like Rashba, Rambam did *not* share Rashba’s view that Hazal never composed an official text. We shall see that although Rambam interpreted the talmudic evidence in a fairly liberal manner like Rashba, his belief in an “official” text for all blessings led him to be much stricter about changing their texts.

## CREATION OF THE OFFICIAL TEXT

Rambam described the creation of the fixed tefillot yet a second time in *Mishneh Torah*, in much greater detail. His famous description has been accepted *de facto* by most traditional Jews to this day. According to Rambam, this is why the fixed prayers were instituted (*Hilkhot Tefilla*, chap. 1):

(4) When Israel was exiled in the days of evil Nebuchadnezzar, they were mixed among the Persians and the Greeks and the rest of the nations, and children were born to them in the lands of the other nations. But the language of those children was corrupt, each one’s speech being a mixture of many languages. And when one of them would speak, he couldn’t express what he needed to in one language without mixing it up, as the verse says, “Their children spoke half Ashdodite, and they didn’t remember how to speak the Jewish tongue. They spoke the languages of other nations. . . .” (Nehemiah 11:24)

(5) Because of this, when one of them would pray, his tongue was

not able to express his needs, or to praise the Holy One, blessed is He, in the holy tongue, without mixing in other languages.

(6) When Ezra and his court realized this, they rose to institute eighteen blessings in order for them. The first three are praise to God, the last three are thanksgiving, and in the middle ones are requests for everything: they are general categories for the needs of each person, and for the needs of the entire community. This was for the blessings to be on the tip of everyone's tongue, and for them to learn them quickly, so that the prayer of these untrained people would be as complete as the prayer of those with eloquent tongues. And because of this they established all of the blessings and prayers that all Israel know fluently, so that every matter would become a set blessing in the mouth of an untutored man.<sup>1</sup>

The popular perception of the origins of the prayers in traditional Jewish circles has been molded almost entirely by the above statement. However, the *motivations* that Rambam ascribed to Ezra and his court seem to be entirely his own idea. The Talmud does state that the "Men of the Great Assembly enacted *blessings* and *tefillot*, *kedushot* and *havdalot* for the people of Israel."<sup>2</sup> And Rambam identified the "Men of the Great Assembly" with "Ezra's Court" in his introduction to *Mishneh Torah*. But no extant talmudic source states *why* the Men of the Great Assembly enacted the obligatory prayers. Rambam filled this gap by positing that Hazal created these prayers as part of a massive educational venture, whose purpose was to preserve the purity of the Hebrew language. But how did he arrive at that conclusion?

Equally problematic is that although the Talmud attributes creating the fixed prayers to Ezra and his court, it never states that they composed an exact official text (a *nosah*), defining every word that must be said. But later, in *Laws of Blessings* (1:5), Rambam states this as a matter of fact: "The *nosah* for all the blessings was established by Ezra and his court." What is this historical view based on?

Before offering any suggestions, it must be emphasized that Rambam's opinion that Hazal composed an exact, "official" text for all blessings, and that their reason for doing so was to preserve the Hebrew language, might be based on traditions from Hazal (or the geonim) that are no longer extant.<sup>3</sup> However, it is possible to make a reasonable conjecture as to how

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1. In the standard printed editions of *Mishneh Torah*, this entire quotation is noted as halakha no. 4. The division into three separate paragraphs (nos. 4–6) is based on early manuscripts, one of which Rambam himself praised for its accuracy. Two new commentaries on *Sefer Ahavah* have been published along with corrected texts based on early manuscripts by Rabbis Yosef Kafih (Jerusalem: Mahon Mishnat ha-Rambam, 1984), and Nahum Rabinovitch, *Yad Peshuta* (Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot, 1984). Both of these commentaries are quite extensive and well worth reading.

2. *Berakhot* 33a.

3. Dr. Uri Melammed emphasized this point to me. However, note that when

Rambam arrived at his conclusions based evidence that is still available to us today.

### HOW DID RAMBAM KNOW?

Rabbi Yosef Kafih, a renowned Israeli expert in Judeo-Arabic literature, has done so regarding the motivation that Rambam ascribed to Ezra for fixing the prayers in Hebrew.<sup>4</sup> In Rabbi Kafih's view, Rambam reached his conclusion by way of the biblical text that he cited, namely Nehemiah 13:23–24. Rabbi Kafih pointed to Saadya Gaon's Arabic commentary on Nehemiah where he (like Rambam) interpreted these verses as a protest against the "impure" languages spoken by the children of the returnees to Zion from Persia. But unlike Rambam, Saadya Gaon explained how he arrived at his interpretation. He claims that if Nehemiah was protesting against mixed marriage (see v. 25) he should have condemned that

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later writers mention Ezra composing Hebrew words for the prayers, they always cite Rambam rather than talmudic, midrashic, or geonic sources.

Also: Rambam may have been influenced by his father, Rabbi Maimon, in his ideas about the origin of rabbinic prayer. See Isadore Twersky, *Introduction to the Mishneh Torah of Maimonides* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), chap. 3 n. 79. In a treatise cited by Twersky, Rabbi Maimon wrote: "Since *tefilla* is so important, the early authorities of blessed memory arranged for us . . . a prayer regarding which the scholar and the ignoramus are the same. The scholar may not add to it, nor may the ignoramus remove anything from it. This is the prayer *Shemoneh Esrei*." (From *Iggeret ha-Nehama*, trans. B. Klar [Jerusalem: 1945], p. 24 ff. Unfortunately, I was unable to consult the original.) Compare this to Rambam's words: "So that the prayer of these untrained people would be as complete as the prayer of those with eloquent tongues."

4. See "Kol she-eino Medaber Bilshon ha-Kodesh 'Over be-Lav," *Sinai* (Shevat 5732): 197–199.

Rabbi Kafih pointed out that both Rambam and Saadya considered studying and speaking Hebrew to be a positive commandment of the Torah. Furthermore, one who speaks Hebrew improperly has violated a negative commandment.

Although he shares his interpretation of this verse with Saadya, only Rambam connects the verse to the institution of fixed prayer.

Ibn Ezra also recognized that Nehemiah's criticism was directed at the people's language (including the language of their prayers), and based on this he attacked poets who brought elements from other languages into their Hebrew *piyyutim*. Like Rambam, Ibn Ezra also praised the fixed prayers for their "pure" Hebrew, but unlike Rambam he does not deal with the date of their composition or the reasons for it. See his lengthy comment on *Kohelet* 5:1, which will be discussed at length in chapter twelve.

Rambam's concern seems to be as much about purity in the usage of any language as about the importance of using Hebrew. What concerns him is that Hebrew was becoming bastardized through its unharmonious mixture with elements of other languages that the Jews spoke at the time. In fact, however, he objects to speaking any language in violation of its own particular rules! On this, see the section on "Prayer in Translation" below in this chapter.

specifically instead of attacking the people's inability to speak Hebrew. Surely mixed marriage is a much greater violation of the Torah than the poor use of language, and that should have been Nehemiah's entire focus! Why, then, was he so concerned about what languages the people spoke?

Saadya Gaon concluded that the women whom the returnees married must have formally converted previously, or may even have been Jewish from birth. (Presumably, Ezra had previously broken up all the cases of actual intermarriage. See Ezra chap. 10.) This left Nehemiah with no other complaint than that they did not teach their children to speak Hebrew properly. It appears that Rambam also accepted this interpretation of Nehemiah, which may have been a popular one among Arabic-speaking students of the Bible during the Middle Ages. Rabbi Kafih's idea puts us in a position to answer our first question, namely: How did Rambam know the motivation of Ezra and his court (the *Anshei Knesset ha-Gedolah*) when they enacted the fixed tefillot? The answer is that Rambam knew, from his interpretation of the biblical evidence, that during the same era there was great concern about the inability of the returnees to Zion to express themselves in Hebrew.

The second question remains, though. How did Rambam know that the same group composed *exact* texts for their blessings, word for word? Isn't it possible, as Rashba assumed, that they simply enacted a general format for blessings, leaving individuals free to use their own words?

I suggest that since, according to Rambam, the fixed prayers were enacted as part of an educational enterprise whose purpose was to reinvigorate Hebrew expression among the masses, this necessitated composing an exact text, not just general guidelines for what to say in a blessing. Enacting nothing more than a flexible structure for the blessings would not have been sufficient, because if people could not express themselves in Hebrew they would not be able to make use of a general format for blessings that required them to supply their own Hebrew words. Moreover, enacting such a general format might backfire, because if clumsy speakers of Hebrew were allowed to improvise in their own words they would invariably choose to do so in other, more familiar languages rather than in Hebrew! Worse, even if they tried to pray in Hebrew they might abuse the language.

Thus, in order to revive Hebrew as the language for prayer, it was necessary to provide Jews with a fixed Hebrew text of the blessings, an eloquent text composed in clear, understandable language, "so that the prayer of these untrained people would be as complete as the prayer of those with eloquent tongues. And because of this they established all of the blessings and prayers that all Israel know fluently, so that every matter would become a set blessing in the mouth of an untutored man."

At this point we must address a question brought up by other medieval authorities who didn't believe in a binding official text: If there *was* an official text, then why wasn't it recorded in the Talmud? Rambam was fully aware of this question, and he addressed it directly in his *Commentary on the Mishna* when he explained why Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi (the author of the Mishna) didn't include the laws of mezuza in the Mishna. Rambam gave

the simplest answer possible to the question: "The reason is that because these things were so well known in his [Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi's] opinion during the time of the Mishna's composition, that they are things which are well known and common individuals are accustomed to, that no one is unaware of, and which therefore there was no reason to talk about them in his opinion, just like he didn't set the order of prayer, meaning its *nosah* and the method of appointing the *shaliah tzibbur*, since the matter was so well known and he was writing a law book and not a siddur."<sup>5</sup> Thus, the fact that the Talmud records no fixed text does not contradict Rambam's belief in that text.

It must be re-emphasized that everything suggested here about the reasons for Rambam's belief in an official text that was composed by Ezra and his court is only a conjecture. We will never know for sure what led Rambam to think that the *Anshei Knesset ha-Gedolah* composed an exactly worded text, or how he knew that their purpose in doing this was to revive the use of Hebrew for tefilla. However, the crucial point is that Rambam did indeed believe this, despite the fact that no rabbinic source definitely implies it.<sup>6</sup>

### CHANGING THE TEXT

Now the fact that Rambam thought there was an official *nosah*, whatever his reasons may have been, led to a certain amount of tension with the halakhic sources. Whether or not one believes in an official *nosah* for the blessings, it is certain that even if a person changes words in that text he has still fulfilled his halakhic obligation. (This, of course, is provided he doesn't leave out specific details of blessings that Hazal considered to be essential,

5. *Perush ha-Mishnayot, Menahot* 4:1. I am grateful to Ezra Fleischer, "Le-Kadmoniyut Tefillot ha-Hova be-Yisrael," *Tarbiz* 59 (1990): 399 n. 5 for making me aware of this reference, which helps illustrate Rambam's view so nicely. After recently reading his article I added this reference to the draft of this chapter accordingly. We will discuss Fleischer's views on the "official" text at length in chapter ten.

6. Blidstein, *ibid.*, pp. 39–52, discusses Rambam's views on the origin of rabbinic prayer at length. He touches on some larger issues than I have, going beyond the single point that there was an "official" text.

In general, his fine book may be viewed as a collection of extremely thorough lessons on Rambam's *Hilkhot Tefilla*, which both analyze the halakhic details and relate them to overall themes in Rambam's worldview. He addresses a number of Rambam's ideas mentioned in this book (and especially in the present chapter), often fleshing out the issues more thoroughly and adding important references. Anyone interested in Rambam's views on prayer should make reading Blidstein's book a priority. I found no major areas where my views clashed with his, and occasionally the sources that he marshals serve to back up points made in this book. However, his book does not include a thorough discussion of the views of *rishonim* who argued with Rambam about fixed texts, though he does have a good discussion of the debate on *piyyut* (see pp. 123–150).

such as mentioning *shem* and *malhut*, *gevurot geshamim*, etc.) Because of this, Rabbi Yose's rule that "anyone who alters the format [*matbea*'] that the *hakhamim* made for the blessings has not fulfilled his obligation" does not apply to any change in the text, but only to violations of major rules. However, Rambam is somewhat ambiguous in his use of the term *matbea*'. As we shall see, he appears to apply the term in a much broader way than Rabbi Yose.

Rambam's third and final description of how and why the blessings were composed is in *Laws of Blessings* (1:5), and only here does he stipulate that Ezra and his court composed an exact, authoritative, and binding wording (*nosah*) for all blessings:

(5) The *nosah* for all the blessings was established by Ezra and his court. It is not fitting [*ein ra'uy*] to change them, not to add [words] to any one of them nor to subtract from them.

And anyone who changes the format [*matbea*'] which the rabbis decreed for the blessings is in error.

And any blessing which does not mention *shem* and *malhut* is not considered a blessing (unless it immediately follows another blessing).

Thus, the *nosah* of each blessing, not just its general format (*matbea*'), was decreed by Ezra and his court. Based on this, Rambam's two previous descriptions of how the blessings were enacted should be understood in the same way, even though he didn't use the word *nosah* before.

Note that I divided halakha no. 5 into three paragraphs. The first sentence clearly refers to the words of the blessings; Rambam writes that these texts were composed by Ezra and his court, and that it is "not fitting" to change any words in them. But this objection to changing any words is not based on any statement in the Talmud! Rather, it seems to be a conclusion based on the assumption that there is, indeed, an official text for all of the blessings. As Rabbi Yosef Karo explained in his commentary *Kesef Mishna*:

It is difficult to understand why our Master [Rambam] changed the language and wrote that [anyone who changes the format] "is in error." It is also important to examine why he wrote "it is not fitting to change them."

It seems to me that there are two types of "changing." The first is when one says the *nosah* of the blessing established by the *hakhamim*, but he adds to it or leaves some of it out. Or else he says something similar to the *nosah* established by the *hakhamim*, but he says it in different words which, nevertheless, allude to [the same point as] the *nosah* that Hazal established. But since the meaning of his words conveys what Hazal decreed there is no "error," but it is still "not fitting" to do this.

Thus, since Hazal composed a text, they meant for that text to be used. If they considered people free to change the text on their own, why would

they have composed it in the first place? The conclusion must be that it is not right to change words in any of the blessings.

However, it cannot be said that Hazal explicitly *forbade* people to change words, because there is no evidence of this anywhere. It seems that this is why Rambam chose to write that it is "not fitting" to change words. It is not fitting, but it is also not explicitly forbidden.

It is now clear how Rambam resolves the tension between his own belief that Hazal composed official texts for the blessings and the halakhic evidence, which does not prohibit changing the words. (And that, on the contrary, states that a person fulfils his obligation even if he *does* change the words!) Rambam views reciting the exact "official" text as the primary way to recite any blessing. This is self-evident, which is why the Talmud doesn't mention it as an explicit requirement. However, it was necessary for the Talmud to point out the specific rules that, when they are violated, will invalidate the recitation of a blessing. Therefore, although there is no explicit prohibition of changing words, it is still not the proper thing to do.

The second sentence in halakha no. 5 is ambiguous. Rambam wrote that one who changes the *matbea`* is "in error." Does an "error" mean that the blessing is completely invalid or not? And what exactly does Rambam mean by *matbea`*?

In *Laws of Shema`* Rambam wrote that a person is in "error" if he changes "openings" and "closures," but there he clarified that the "error" invalidates the blessing: "and he must say that blessing again in its [proper] form." He may mean the same thing here. If that is the case then he has simply codified Rabbi Yose's law here. Rabbi Yose objected to a person using his own words for a blessing, saying something like: "This bread is so beautiful! Blessed is God who created it!" He declared such "blessings" to be invalid, because their content veered too far from the ideas that Hazal wanted to express in their blessings. Rambam agrees, and by "error" he means that such a blessing is completely invalid. This possibility is strengthened by the fact that Rambam's version of Rabbi Yose's statement in the talmud seems to have had the words "is in error" instead of our version ("does not fulfil his obligation"); Rambam did not coin the phrase "is in error" on his own, but borrowed it from his version of Rabbi Yose.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the idea that a person who changes the *matbea`* is "in error" is connected to the *last* sentence: "any blessing which does not mention *shem* and *malhut* is not considered a blessing." The word *matbea`* then refers to the *format* (not *text*) of blessings, and "error" means that one has not fulfilled his obligation.<sup>8</sup>

7. Yehoshua Blau, *Teshuvot ha-Rambam*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Makitzei Nirdamim, 1961), p. 466 n. 19.

8. This relatively clear and simple explanation is offered by Rabbi Kafih (*ibid.*, p. 26); it purposely avoids the two solutions suggested by Rabbi Yosef Karo in *Kesef Mishna*, which are considerably more complicated.

*Kesef Mishna* first suggests that Rabbi Yose's objection may have been to saying, "Blessed is God who created it" instead of "Who brings forth bread from the earth." The latter is correct because it is specific; it mentions exactly what God has blessed



To briefly summarize the explanation of halakha no. 5: Rambam first states that even *minor* changes should not be made in blessings, though a blessing said with minor changes is still valid. Secondly, he writes that any *major* change in format (*shinnui matbea*) invalidates a blessing. Lastly, he points out the specific requirement for *shem* and *malhut* (which he had not previously codified), the lack of which also invalidates a blessing.

## PRAYER IN TRANSLATION

In the next halakha (1:6) Rambam continues to follow the idea that one should not even change minor words, but that if he does so the blessing is usually still valid after the fact. This is even true in foreign languages:

(6) All blessings may be said in any language, as long as one recites them as the rabbis decreed [*ke'ein she-tikkenu hakhamim*]. But if he did change the form [*matbea*], as long as he mentioned *shem* and *malhut* and the topic of the blessing he has fulfilled his obligation, even in a foreign language.

This rule is based on the story of Benjamin the shepherd we read in the last chapter, who (according to the gemara's conclusion) said "Blessed is the Merciful One, the Master of this bread" and said those words in Aramaic rather than in Hebrew. By saying this he obviously "changed the form" of the blessing, and Rambam held that he was wrong to rephrase it at all, even

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us with. Rabbi Yose declares that if using your own phraseology changes the content of a blessing from specificity to generality then you are in error and have not fulfilled your obligation. Kesef Mishna writes that Rambam has codified this in the second sentence of halakha no. 5.

However, Rambam uses the word *ta'ut* (error) both ways in *Mishneh Torah*: for errors that invalidate a blessing as well as for those that don't. (See *Laws of Prayer* chap. 10 for numerous examples of this.) It could very well be that changing the *matbea* is an "error" according to Rambam, but that the blessing is still valid after the fact. If this is the case, then Rambam is *not* codifying Rabbi Yose's rule here (though he is borrowing the latter's terminology). Rather, the second sentence in halakha no. 5 simply elaborates on the first one. Halakha no. 5 thus means that it is "not fitting" to change the text of a blessing, and that if he does so he has "erred," though his blessing is still valid after the fact.

*Kesef Mishna* prefers this last interpretation. The problem with the first one is that if Rabbi Yose regards generalizing a blessing ("Blessed is God who created it") as changing its meaning too much, then why was Benjamin the shepherd's blessing acceptable when he said, "Blessed is the Master of this bread"? Instead, we are forced to say that Rabbi Yose only objected to omitting *shem* and *malhut* in Rabbi Meir's formulations. But Rambam writes that even changing less important phrases is still an "error." Why should this be so, if there is no explicit prohibition? *Kesef Mishna* answers with a rhetorical question: "Because what profit is there in changing them?" In other words, since Hazal composed an official text it should be used, because there is nothing to be gained by changing the words.

in another language. What Benjamin did was incorrect for Rambam, though his blessing was still valid after the fact. This is in contrast to Rashba who, as we saw, wrote that Benjamin's innovative blessing in Aramaic was perfectly acceptable (and proved that this was so from the context of the talmudic discussion).<sup>9</sup> Rambam disagreed.

Rambam held that saying the exact words of the "official" prayer text constituted an obligation, an obligation that extends even to translations. Therefore, for a translation of the "official" text to be valid, it must convey all the nuances of the Hebrew original. In *Laws of Shema* 2:10 he wrote that one who recites the *Shema* in another language "must beware of making mistakes in that language, and must be as precise in that language as he is [when he says *Shema*] in the Holy Tongue." The assumption here is that a

9. See above, chapter eight, note 26, for Rashba's proof that Rava considered Benjamin's blessing fully permissible (*lekhatehilla*).

The case of Benjamin the shepherd is quoted by Rabbi Yosef Karo in his *Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayyim* 167:10 (as a possible substitute for *Ha-Motzi*) and 187:1 (regarding *Birkat ha-Mazon*), but in both cases the verdict for one who does as Benjamin did is "yatza (he fulfilled his obligation)," a term that often implies *bedi'avad*; this again is based on Rambam's ruling. *Mishna Berura* makes it clear in both cases that to follow Benjamin's example is prohibited *lekhatehilla* according to Karo and is only acceptable after the fact (167:53 and 187:4). However, Rashba's lenient view was accepted by Rema in *Orach Hayyim* 68.

In *Tur* 167 and 187 the same word *yatza* was used, but there it need not imply *bedi'avad* simply because Rav himself used that term in the original source in the gemara (which the passages in the *Tur* are based on), and Rashba showed that there is good reason to believe that Rav meant *lekhatehilla* in the original context. For Rabbi Yosef Karo in the *Shulhan Arukh*, however, it is reasonable to assume that *yatza* meant *bedi'avad*, because his rulings on this matter are directly based on Rambam's interpretation of what Rav said.

That the *Tur* did not accept Rambam's view is obvious in sec. 68, when it listed a number of prominent authorities who not only permitted but even urged the recitation of *piyyutim* (liturgical poems) during the blessings. It is true that at the very end of sec. 68, the author of the *Tur* quoted his father, Rabbenu Asher, as having recommended the elimination of *piyyutim*. However, this is not because Rabbenu Asher opposed insertions during the blessings in principle, but because in practice people find the lengthy *piyyutim* to be "an excuse to interrupt [prayer] with idle talk about useless matters" during them. (Cf. chapter twelve, note 35.) In any case, the *Tur* does not prohibit changing words in blessings, as long as they continue to match the theme of the blessing.

Thus, Rambam was the only major authority to explicitly state that changing words in blessings is only acceptable *bedi'avad*, but not *lekhatehilla*. (He was followed later in a *teshuva* by his younger contemporary Rabbi Meir Abulafia [Ramah, 1180–1244] of Spain, quoted and rejected in the *Tur* [68].) In the *Shulhan Arukh*, as we said, Rambam's view on not changing words was accepted by Rabbi Yosef Karo in *Orach Hayyim* 68 but rejected by Rema, who accepted Rashba's lenient view instead.

However, even Sephardic Jews who generally follow the rulings of Rabbi Yosef Karo should pause to consider that Saadya Gaon permitted such textual changes along with the overwhelming majority of *rishonim* from North Africa, Spain, and Provence. For details, see chapter eight, notes 9 and 60.

translation actually transforms the words of the *Shema* text into another language, and must therefore abide by all the rules of saying it in Hebrew including precise and correct recitation. The translation is not just an *explanation* of the *Shema* for those who don't know Hebrew, but must rather be a *restatement* of the *Shema* text itself in all of its details. However, it is very difficult to convey all the nuances of a Hebrew text in translation! Concern about the severe difficulty (or near impossibility) of a perfect translation, which is implicit in Rambam's requirement that translations must convey the exact sense of the Hebrew text, led many later authorities to discourage Jews from making use of the "leniency" allowing them to say the *Shema* (or the blessings) in languages other than Hebrew, even when they couldn't understand the Hebrew.<sup>10</sup>

Ra'avad, however, recognized that any translation of a blessing is really only an interpretation [*perush*] of that blessing, not a precise transformation of its text. This makes the careful, rigid use of language unnecessary for a translation because "who will be careful about how he states his interpretation [*mi yedakdek ahar perusho*]?" The Hebrew prayer *itself* requires exactness, but an *explanation* of that prayer in another language does not.

In his commentary *Kesef Mishna*, Rabbi Yosef Karo defended Rambam's requirement for exactness, even in a translation, against Ra'avad. He recognized that a translation can only be an imperfect imitation of the original Hebrew blessing. However, the translation of a Hebrew word still requires that one say "the truest and closest equivalent of that [Hebrew] word in the other language. . . ." In other words, Rabbi Yosef Karo says that Rambam requires a translator of blessings to choose the best lexical match for each Hebrew word according to its meaning in each context.<sup>11</sup>

However, the explanation in *Kesef Mishna* notwithstanding, there is still a fundamental disagreement between Rambam and Ra'avad. It is doubtful that Ra'avad would accept stringency in the lexical choices for translations, a requirement that *Kesef Mishna* considers "obvious." Ra'avad's only concern is that the general *theme* of a blessing be conveyed in translation, but he is not concerned about the exact nuances of its words. Thus, even poor lexical choices will often suffice! But Rambam's concern is to convey the *words* of a blessing as closely as possible in translation, not just its

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10. The difficulty (or near impossibility) of assuring an exact translation led many later *posekim* to discourage prayer in translation, but Rambam seems to have been the first to voice this objection. See *Eleh Divrei ha-Berit*, p. 48; *Mishna Berura* 62:3; *Yabi'a Omer*, vol. 5, 12:5. This objection, of course, rests on the assumption that there are such things as "official" texts for the blessings in the first place!

It is noteworthy that Rambam never mentions the rule that *tefilla* may be said "in any language" in *Mishneh Torah*. But in *Laws of Blessings* 1:6 he wrote that *all* blessings may be said in any language, and this presumably includes prayer (the *Amida*), too. And in his *Commentary to the Mishna* (*Sotah* 7:1) Rambam explicitly followed Alfasi by ruling that only when one is together with the congregation may he pray in another language.

11. I appreciate Dr. Uri Melammed's help in making the exact meaning of this comment by *Kesef Mishna* more clear to me.

general theme.<sup>12</sup> In conclusion, Rambam's concern for the recitation of what he considered to be the "official text" led him to severely limit the halakha's permission to pray in other languages.

### THE FIXED TEXT IN RAMBAM'S CORRESPONDENCE

Three of Rambam's responsa discuss changing the text of blessings, especially by adding *piyyutim* (liturgical poems) to them.<sup>13</sup> In one he calls changing the text an error (*ta'ut*). In the second he writes that it is forbidden to change the *matbea'* of the blessings, especially to add *piyyutim*. These terms are familiar to us from the passages of the *Mishneh Torah* that we studied above.

Finally, in a third letter, Rambam answers a very strong question, one that seems to undermine his assumption of "official" texts for the blessings. The questioner was confused by a seeming contradiction that he found in the Talmud. Many statements in the Talmud, he wrote, imply that Hazal only cared about the main idea in blessings, not their exact words. This is especially the case when Hazal allow prayer in any language. But on the other hand, the Talmud sometimes stipulates that certain exact words must be said. How, he asked, can these two different approaches be reconciled?

(This, of course, is the central question that we have been trying to answer all along, and which Rashba solved by stipulating that the exact words never matter unless the Talmud specifically points out that they do!)

Rambam replied that Hazal required strict adherence to their text. Even when praying in a different language, one may only switch the *language*, but not change the exact *content* at all. Rambam implies (though he doesn't state this) that when Hazal wrote that certain specific changes in the wording render a blessing invalid, they only pointed out the most important phrases or words from entire texts that were already completely fixed. Thus, the stress put on reciting specific words was *symptomatic* of Hazal's attitude. They frowned upon any textual changes, no matter how minor.

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12. Ra'avad's less stringent view about the need for exactness in prayer translations is probably rooted in mystical views about Hebrew prayer, namely that *Hebrew* words have "hidden" powers and must be recited exactly. The words of a *translation*, however, have no special value beyond the fact that a person can fulfil his basic halakhic obligation through them. But since they have no *intrinsic* value one need not be exact about how he says them. (This idea is very similar to the view expressed in *Bi'ur Halakha*, quoted above in chapter eight, note 40.)

For Rambam, however, the exact use of language and the exact recitation of the "official" text is a value in and of itself, and this is why he is stringent both regarding the Hebrew prayers themselves and translations of them.

13. Blau, *ibid.*, no. 181 (pp. 329–330); no. 254 (pp. 465–468); no. 260 (pp. 487–489). Hebrew translations of these are quoted in the commentaries of Rabbis Kafih and Rabinovitch (see note 1, above).

On Rambam's objections to *piyyut*, see the sources described in chapter twelve, note 34.

## RAMBAM'S PRAYER TEXT

At the end of his *Sefer Ahavah*, the section of *Mishneh Torah* where Rambam discussed the laws of *Shema*, Prayer, and Blessings, he wrote out the texts of the blessings and recorded other important customs relating to prayer. At first glance, after all we learned about Rambam's insistence that people not change the "official" texts of blessings, it would seem that in his prayer text he was simply providing that "official" text for his readers! By extension, it would seem that he considered it an obligation to use his text, or at least that his own was preferable to others. Otherwise, why would he have bothered writing it?

On the other hand, Rambam was undoubtedly aware that there were countless variations in the texts of the blessings used by Jewish communities all around the world. But there is no evidence that he ever demanded any Jewish community to abandon their own traditional version of the siddur and replace it with his own. Even the standard Sephardic siddur of today does not match Rambam's text, which it would if Rambam had insisted that his own version be adopted by Jews who accepted his authority.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, Rambam never wrote that his version is the "original" one composed by Ezra and the *Anshei Knesset ha-Gedolah*. If Rambam thought that he had somehow succeeded in reconstructing Ezra's "original" text, wouldn't he have made it clear to his readers that he was, indeed, recording that text? (Instead, the section simply begins with the words "The people's custom is. . . .") And wouldn't he have given us at least some information about what sources he used to reconstruct the "original" text and the methodology he employed in doing so?

We are forced to conclude that Rambam didn't consider his prayer text in *Mishneh Torah* to be obligatory, and that in no way did he think it was the "original" or "official" text from the time of Ezra. He simply recorded his own customary *nosah* as one valid text among many, after making whatever minor changes were necessary to make it halakhically and linguistically accurate. This is the most cogent and straightforward explanation of Rambam's prayer text, as Rabbi Nahum Rabinovitch explained in his introductory remarks to the text:

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14. Actually it not the Sephardic siddur but the *Tiklal*, the siddur of the Jews of Yemen, which is the extant version most closely resembling Rambam's *nosah*. This is probably because the Yemenite Jews venerated Rambam greatly, and accepted the rulings in his *Mishneh Torah* on almost all matters. It seems likely, therefore, that they accepted the prayer text included in *Mishneh Torah* as well. (That the Jews of Yemen accepted his prayer text even though Rambam did *not* demand others to adopt it is a further illustration of their great respect, not only of his views, but even of his customs.)

However, Rabbi Yosef Kafih explained the close match between the *Tiklal* and Rambam's prayer text in a very different way, and arrived at a radical conclusion about the origin of Rambam's text. For a description of his view, see note 17 below.

Prayer books were already numerous and widespread in the days of our Master [Rambam]. Especially well known were *Seder Rav Amram Gaon* and the siddur of Rav Sa'adya Gaon. In addition to this, various customs prevailed throughout the Diaspora, and different communities each kept their own *nosah*. Since in most of the differences there is nothing significant which would invalidate [a blessing], our Master did not think it would be correct to incorporate his own *nosah* into his book [*Mishneh Torah*] as an obligatory halakhic ruling, so instead he put it in a separate section for practical use by the masses. Thus, whoever wanted to continue following one of the accepted siddurim that was already in widespread use was permitted to do so.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, Rambam appended his prayer text to the *Mishneh Torah* for the convenience of those who needed an accurate version of the siddur. By doing so he never meant to deny the legitimacy of other versions, and that is why he purposely recorded it *outside* the framework of *Mishneh Torah* as an appendix.<sup>16</sup> Although, as we saw above in *Laws of Blessings* 1:5, Rambam would have preferred that Ezra's text not be changed, he also acknowledged that there was no halakhic significance to most minor variations in wording. It is reasonable to assume that Rambam considered it impossible to reconstruct Ezra's "original" text in the eleventh century, so many years after Ezra's death and with so many legitimate textual variations in use among the Jewish people.<sup>17</sup>

15. Rabinovitch, *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 1307.

16. Rabinovitch, *ibid.*, noted that Rambam also included a text of the haggadah as an appendix to *Hilkhot Hametz u-Matzah* (on the laws on Passover). There too the haggadah is purposely outside the framework of the laws in *Mishneh Torah*, because Rambam is only offering it to provide his readers with an halakhic-like acceptable version of the haggadah for their convenience, but not to suggest that his version is the only valid one.

An added indication of this is that in both his prayer text and in his version of the haggadah, Rambam does not divide the text into chapters and individual *halakhot* (as opposed to his procedure throughout the rest of *Mishneh Torah*). Similarly, his introduction to *Mishneh Torah* (which is also outside the framework of the laws in the rest of the work) is missing chapter divisions as well. It seems that in order to distinguish them from the collection of laws in *Mishneh Torah*, Rambam purposely avoided chapter and halakha divisions for all additions that were not meant to be binding halakhic rulings.

17. According to Rabbi Yosef Kafih (*ibid.*, pp. 708–711), Rambam truly believed that the prayer text he recorded in *Mishneh Torah* actually was an "official" one. Because of its great similarity to the Yemenite *Tiklal* (cf. note 14 above), and because of the extraordinary accuracy which is rightly ascribed to Yemenite scribes, Kafih posited that Rambam simply adopted the Yemenite tradition because he was convinced that it was the best prayer text extant in the world at his time!

Kafih found ways to explain all of the minor discrepancies between Rambam's text and the *Tiklal*, and thus considered it possible to reject earlier views on the origin of Rambam's text. Daniel Goldshmidt, in particular, had shown that Rambam's text cannot be directly related to any other extant text (including the *Tiklal*),

More importantly, it is likely that Rambam would not have bothered with a reconstruction of Ezra's text even if he thought that there was some way to accomplish it, because ultimately such a reconstruction would have no religious or halakhic value.<sup>18</sup> As we saw above in the passage from the first chapter of the *Laws of Prayer*, Rambam felt that the value of Ezra's text lay in the fact that it was written in clear, simple, and accurate Hebrew, so that it would be understandable to all and such that even less learned Jews could use it. That is the primary reason why Ezra's "original" text should not be altered on purpose. But minor textual variations that *inadvertently* crept into the prayer text over the centuries make no difference at all, as long as the resulting text is still clear, linguistically accurate, and

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and simply concluded that it must simply have been the version popular in Egypt during Rambam's lifetime. (Goldshmidt's position is quoted in Kafih, *ibid.*, pp. 709–710.) But Kafih counters that Goldshmidt used an imperfect edition of the *Tiklal*, and was thus led to the wrong conclusion! The "true" *Tiklal*, according to Kafih, can be shown to match Rambam's version exactly.

Kafih's faith in the Yemenite tradition is so firm, in fact, that in his edition of the prayer text in Rambam's *Mishneh Torah* he exclusively follows Yemenite manuscripts, even when they contradict the oldest known manuscript of *Mishneh Torah*, a text that received Rambam's *imprimatur* in his own handwriting! According to Kafih, Rambam simply certified that the scribe who copied that manuscript later checked it against the original, autographed copy of *Mishneh Torah*. But who can say how carefully he checked it? In Kafih's opinion, the Yemenite manuscripts of *Mishneh Torah* are to be preferred.

A few years later, Yitzhak Shilat engaged in a lengthy correspondence with Rabbi Kafih on this issue. Rabbi Kafih's letter and Shilat's response are printed as an appendix to *Iggerot Ha-Rambam*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. Yitzhak Shilat (Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot, 1987), pp. 701–704. Shilat rejected each of Kafih's points convincingly, both the latter's reasons to prefer Yemenite manuscripts and the way he resolved discrepancies between the *Tiklal* and Rambam's text.

With all due respect to Rabbi Kafih, who is one of the few outstanding experts on Judeo-Arabic literature in our time (and a major scholar in all areas of Torah study from whose works I personally have benefited and learned much), it seems that the conclusion shared by Goldshmidt and Rabinovitch (namely, that Rambam simply recorded his local custom) is to be preferred in this case. Their view fits in best with the available evidence and does not rely on any unprovable conjectures; it is therefore to be preferred. In addition to this, Shilat suggested that what probably accounts for the close resemblance between the *Tiklal* and Rambam's text was that the Yemenite Jews adopted many elements from Rambam's text, just as they consistently adopted his halakhic rulings. Thus, it seems that the exact reversal of Rabbi Kafih's scenario is most likely what actually occurred.

18. This fits in with Rambam's philosophy of prayer, which we discussed in chapter five. Since contemplating metaphysics is the ultimate goal, and the anthropomorphic idea of God found in common prayer is only a compromise ("the Torah speaks in the language of man" applies to prayer as well, as we saw), then there is no intrinsic value to any one text. The text the Men of the Great Assembly legislated is binding because it conforms to their *halakhot* and because it is the best possible pedagogic device. But there is no intrinsic holiness to its exact words.

For exactly the same reason, there is little value to informal prayer, either.

poses no halakhic difficulties.<sup>19</sup> In short, Rambam never demanded replacing any of the numerous versions of the siddur with another more "correct" version, not even with his own.

### CONCLUSION: TWO VALID WAYS TO READ THE RABBINIC SOURCES

To summarize, we have seen four basic ways that Rambam resolves the tension between his belief in an officially prescribed fixed text with the many halakhic sources that seem to suggest a more liberal approach to the words. We will now contrast his attitude towards the talmudic evidence with those of other authorities (primarily Rashba) who denied the existence of an official text:

- (1) The fact that Hazal never recorded an official text, and never objected to most minor omissions from the blessings, led some scholars (such as Rashba and, later, Heinemann) to deny that there ever was a fixed text. Rambam counters that the official text was well-known in talmudic times, and therefore Hazal only took pains to specify those omissions that invalidate a blessing, but not small changes that are merely "not fitting" to make. Thus, a distinction between what is "not fitting" and what is blatantly forbidden allows Rambam to discourage even minor changes in the text.
- (2) Similarly, Hazal only insisted that certain *specific* phrases never be used in tefilla; for the "deniers" this implied that all *other* additions to the text are permissible. Hazal also required *particular* phrases or ideas to be mentioned in blessing. Again, for the "deniers" this implies that there is no objection to leaving out any *other* minor phrases or ideas. Rambam counters that Hazal only pointed out those textual changes that serve to invalidate a blessing. Other minor changes, while they do not render a blessing invalid, are still frowned upon. In other words, when Hazal required certain textual details, the "deniers" saw these as *exceptions*, because all *other* changes are permissible. Rambam, however, regarded statements of Hazal that are strict about textual details of *tefilla* as *symptomatic* rather than as exceptions. For him, Hazal frowned on *all* textual changes, but only pointed out those that are important enough to invalidate a blessing.
- (3) For "deniers" of a fixed text, it is clear why Hazal allowed people like Benjamin the shepherd to say blessings in their own words. Rambam

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19. Rambam's allegiance to the "official" text is therefore not the exactly same as Rabbi Ya'akov Emden's, which we studied in chapter eight. They are similar in that both would advocate reciting the original fixed text even if there was no underlying mystical meaning to the words. But if Jews were reciting a text that was entirely valid but not identical to a known "official" text, Rambam would not force them to change their custom, while Emden would.



counters that such leniencies are still not proper. When Hazal seem to accept them, they are really only saying that such blessings are valid after the fact (*bedi'avad*). However, it is wrong to change the text in the first place.

- (4) For the “deniers,” the fact that the halakha allows prayer in other languages makes perfect sense, because the exact words do not matter. But Rambam counters that the freedom to say tefillot in other languages is severely limited; it is only proper if the exact nuances of the Hebrew text are conveyed in the translation. If a person does succeed in doing this, he is still considered to have recited the official *mosah* (even in translation).

All four of these approaches served later authorities who believed in a fixed text, too. It may now be said that the existence of an “original text,” though it cannot be *proven* by the talmudic evidence, still allows for a valid reading of the rabbinic sources. The modern academic research by such as Heinemann is based on new ways of classifying the talmudic evidence using form-critical techniques, as well as on some extra-talmudic sources (such as early prayer texts from the Cairo Geniza), and its conclusion must remain that the blessings were very fluid initially. However, the “original text” view should not be dismissed as strongly as it often has been.

In conclusion, we demonstrated here and in chapter eight that each view—both that of those who denied that there was an official text and that of those who, like Rambam, believed in one—is able to explain the talmudic sources according to its own assumptions.

Both approaches, then, are valid and are consistent with the talmudic evidence. Both are the words of the Living God. *However, this does not mean that both can easily coexist in terms of religious practice.* For each implies a Torah value that is to some degree exclusive of the other.

Remember that *Kesef Mishna*, explaining Rambam, rhetorically asked what profit there is to changing any of the words of the “official text.” He meant, of course, that it has no value!<sup>20</sup> But the other camp might argue that it is important to avoid *keva* by “saying something new” in each prayer (as we learned in chapter one). In the Middle Ages the primary way of adding *hiddush* to prayer was by inserting *piyyutim* into the prayers, which gave prayer a “new” depth of meaning that was absent without them. It is no accident that, for the *rishonim*, the matter of changing prayer texts explicitly was inextricably bound up with the issue of adding *piyyutim*.<sup>21</sup>

Rambam might counter that the obligation to “say something new” was

20. *Bah* on *Tur* 68 made the same argument, noting that while many *gedolim* recommend adding *piyyutim*, a few (Rambam and Ramah) prohibit it because the practice “lengthens” blessings. In theory, then, it should be eliminated to avoid any possible problems. But he concludes that the arguments permitting *piyyut* are so strong, and its religious value so important, that the Ashkenazic custom of reciting them is valid despite Rambam’s view.

21. It could be argued that sources such as Rashba, Ritva, and Re’ah who justified inserting *piyyutim* were only saying that there is no halakhic prohibition and

not accepted as the halakha. But the response would be that it is still an important value to "say something new" for those capable of doing it, even if it is too great an obligation for others.

On the other hand, denial of an official text lessens the value of custom and tradition, especially a carefully-worded text that some, like Rambam, ascribe to Ezra and the *Anshei Knesset ha-Gedolah*. Minimally, the exact words in our *siddurim* have been carefully preserved and lovingly recited and studied in their present forms for many centuries by men who were good and pious Jews and great Torah scholars. This value cannot be denied either.

Ultimately, it must be recognized that both sides are based on true Torah values, but that there may be no way of reconciling them to the satisfaction of both. Rambam's view, though it was a minority opinion in the Middle Ages as we saw in chapter eight, has dominated Jewish life ever since (partly for mystical reasons he himself would never have accepted). But part of the reason our *tefillot* have lost so much meaning is that the opposing value (namely, informality and personal expression) has been almost completely denied. The time has come for us to respect the values represented on both sides, and to regard both as legitimate choices for Jews who pray. The competition between two Torah values is an argument for the sake of heaven.

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were not (as I have presented them here) implying that there is actually a *positive* religious value to singing or reciting them.

Indeed, the truth is that none of them go out of their way to urge the recitation of *piyyutim* or describe how it fulfils a religious value. It is most likely, however, that this is simply a function of context. Each of these sources is explicitly dealing with the question of whether the halakha allows textual changes; this makes it relevant for them to show that the practice of adding *piyyutim* is permissible, but not to go off on a tangent concerning why *piyyutim* are important in the first place. That, they assumed, was obvious.

In chapter twelve we will discuss the medieval debate about *piyyut*. While some rabbinic authorities (most notably Rambam) opposed the institution of *piyyut* with vehemence, this in no way implies that those who permitted it found no value in it, that they were in fact only giving a technical justification for the widespread custom of reciting them in the middle of the blessings. To assume this is to allow our knowledge of Rambam's negative views on *piyyut* to unjustly influence our reading of other sources who, in fact, disagreed with him on this topic!

On the contrary, it requires less credulity to assume that Rashba, Ritva, and Re'ah found meaning in reciting the *piyyutim*, than to suppose that they only grudgingly permitted them.

## *Implications for Current Scholarship: An Afterword*

This chapter is for readers who are interested in how the age-old debate on whether Hazal ever mandated an “official text” for prayer has continued in academic circles during the past few years. Readers who are *not* interested in current scholarship on an abstract historical issue are advised to skip this Afterword and go on to the next chapter, where we will discuss the effect on *kavvana* today of the reality of the fixed text of the siddur. But readers who are curious about a current attempt to revive the “official text” theory (and my criticism of it) will find ample food for thought by reading on.

### SWINGING THE PENDULUM BACK

In the last two chapters we studied the views of rabbinic authorities after the time of the Talmud on “official” fixed prayer texts, and we also made some comparisons to the parallel debate among modern scholars on the very same issue. We concluded that both rabbinic authorities and modern scholars made use of the same sources in the literature of Hazal, and the ambiguous nature of those sources led some members of both groups in two opposite directions. Some decided that the rabbinic prayers of Hazal were meant to be fixed recitations of “official” texts whose exact words were binding and unchangeable, while others concluded that Hazal meant to let people talk to God in their own words as long as they stayed within a certain overall structure and followed certain basic rules. In the Middle Ages, Rambam was the chief representative of the rigid first approach. However, the dominant view among both medieval halakhic authorities

and modern scholars accepted the latter scenario, holding that rabbinic prayer never meant to bind Jews to the recitation of any specific text.<sup>1</sup>

Just four short months before the manuscript of this book was due, my attention was drawn to an important article by Ezra Fleischer.<sup>2</sup> I added a few minor comments and references based on his work to previous chapters in this book, but quickly realized that a separate discussion was necessary. The major importance of his article is due to the fact that since the early 1990s Fleischer has brought the "official text" thesis back onto center stage, and he has tried to make the pendulum of scholarly consensus swing back towards it.

So the present chapter is a late addition to this book, a kind of "Afterword" to chapters eight and nine on "Prayer as a Fixed Text." At the end of chapter nine I wrote that "the 'original text' view should not be dismissed as strongly as it often has been." I first wrote those words years ago, long before I saw Fleischer's article. In my opinion, Fleischer's major contribution is to show once again that a cogent reading of all the evidence on the topic still leaves room for the promulgation of an "official text" thesis as a valid historical scenario, a possibility that has been dismissed too eagerly by scholars since Heinemann. One of Fleischer's central points can also help us better understand Rambam's underlying conceptual assumptions about the prayer text (and by contrast, the opposite assumptions of those who differed with him). But in order to make these valuable points clear, we must subject Fleischer's work to some serious criticisms. In the end, our critique of Fleischer's position will strengthen the conclusion we came to in chapter nine that Rambam's view, like the more flexible one we

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1. See chapter eight, notes 9 and 10.

2. "Le-Kadmoniyut Tefillot ha-Hova be-Yisrael," *Tarbiz* 59 (1990): 397–441. I first became aware of the importance of Fleischer's piece when I read the new article on prayer entitled "Prayer: Research on Prayer During the Last Decades of the Century" by Yosef Tabory in the supplement to *Ha-Encyclopedia ha-Ivrit*, vol. 3, cols. 1061–1067. It is unfortunate that Tabory devotes so much space to Fleischer's single article without even a hint of criticism, despite the fact that Stefan Reif's rejoinder ("On the Earliest Development of Jewish Prayer [In Response to Ezra Fleischer's Article]," *Tarbiz* 60 [1991]: 677–681) was available to Tabory when he wrote the article, along with Reif's comments on Fleischer's position in *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer: New Perspectives on Jewish Liturgical History* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1993). A simple remark to the effect that Fleischer's "sharp criticism" of Heinemann has suffered criticism of its own would have been in order.

This is as good a point as any to point out that Tabory is the compiler of an indispensable reference for academic research on Jewish prayer. The supplement to vol. 64 of *Kiryat Sefer*, the Hebrew bibliographic journal, is a *Listing of Articles on the Topics of Prayer and Festivals* (Jerusalem: Jewish National Library, 1993). For some fascinating personal remarks about prayer from his perspective as a religious Jew, see Joseph Tabory, "The Conflict of Halakha and Prayer," *Tradition* 25, no. 1 (Fall 1989): 17–30. The article makes some good points about the possibility of *hiddush* for individuals and communities given the realities of Israeli religious society, and about how kavvana fits into the halakhic system.

encountered in chapter eight, is one of two *equally valid* ways of reading the rabbinic sources on prayer texts.

Let me emphasize that this Afterword makes no attempt whatsoever to “prove” anything about Fleischer’s thesis. When I say that it will be a critique, I mean that it will attempt to raise some larger issues about Fleischer’s approach, including both positive and negative points. Each of these points merits further analysis by serious academic scholars in the future; but by no means is this “Afterword,” which is one small part of a book addressed to a popular audience, the place for a definitive assessment of Fleischer’s work. Whether one accepts his conclusions or not, his work merits a truly authoritative response. But this book is not the forum for such a response, nor am I the one qualified to write it.

However, a short description of his thesis and a critique addressing overall points about it that bear serious questioning does have a place in this book. A description of Fleischer’s views is important here because the fundamental point of chapters eight and nine was that the centuries-long debate about the existence of an “official” prayer text by rabbinic interpreters of the Talmud is closely paralleled by a debate among modern academic scholars. Furthermore, the views of Rambam were a crucial part of the rabbinic debate, and it happens that his views share a very close conceptual affinity to the views of Fleischer, as we shall see. And finally, one of Fleischer’s major points bears addressing for the simple reason that it challenges the central idea I have tried make in the last two chapters: namely, that the ambiguous nature of the evidence makes it impossible to ever “prove” that an “official” rabbinic prayer text existed or that it did not exist. On the contrary, Fleischer claims to have shown that one *did* exist, just as Heinemann in his day claimed with certainty that one never existed. But I believe that both men overstated their positions. Just as we saw that this was true about Heinemann’s absolute denial of an “official text,” the context of the last two chapters makes it worth seeing that Fleischer’s certitude about his position seems to have some serious inadequacies as well. But again, I will “prove” nothing here. All I will do regarding Fleischer’s thesis is to point out some overall areas that seem to require rethinking, for reasons that I hope will be addressed in future writing on the topic.

Though his work is important, Fleischer seems to state his case much more strongly than the evidence warrants, and does an injustice to other legitimate interpretations of the sources. In a note at the beginning of his article he writes the following about the view that he opposes: “The solid conceptual structure which Heinemann built in his book, and the convincing decisiveness of his claims, it seems to me, raised the general agreement about the matter to the level of an axiom.” Fleischer’s goal is to destroy the basis of that structure and bring the axiom down to the level of a disproved theory. It seems to me that if Heinemann erred (according to Fleischer) by overstating his conclusions and claiming that no other view was possible, then Fleischer has compounded the error by repeating exactly the same mistake yet again (though in the opposite direction). Having realized how his predecessors were led astray (again, in his opinion) by the ambiguous

nature of the sources, Fleischer should have been more careful than they were about drawing unwarranted conclusions from the evidence or overstating his own conclusions.

### PRAYER IN THE EARLY SYNAGOGUE?

The strongest part of Fleischer's article is the first section, where he tries to show that the concept of community prayer as a regular obligation did not exist before the Second Temple was destroyed. He claims that while the Temple stood, the only legitimate public *avoda* (worship) by the nation was sacrifice at the Temple in Jerusalem; though prayer was both legitimate and widespread, it was only a voluntary activity by individuals, and could in no way be described as communal worship. The institution of the synagogue definitely existed while the Temple still stood, but Fleischer believes (and tries to prove) that it was mostly a place for Torah reading and public teaching; there is no absolute evidence of its having been a place of communal prayer. But even with this claim, which as we shall see is his strongest one, Fleischer goes too far. He notes that there is no absolute evidence that obligatory communal prayer took place on a regular basis in the synagogue, and from this he concludes that it did not exist. In other words, he argues from silence. But it is not perfect silence: the several statements that explicitly declaring that prayer was an ancient institution in the minds of the rabbis of the Talmud are simply dismissed as *aggadic* attempts to "exaggerate the importance of the institution [of rabbinic prayer] and fortify its prestige" (p. 424). Fleischer is absolutely right that by contrast, the institution of the blessing about heretics at Yavneh "has a recognizably authentic character" (p. 435). But this is simply because it was recorded before the memory of the actual event had faded. It does not mean that statements about earlier times are illegitimate.

When it comes to the rabbinic statements, Heinemann was far more reasonable. When he noted that the descriptions of the origins of prayer in rabbinic literature ascribe those origins to vastly different periods, almost all of them very early ones, he simply wrote that "the idea common to all the statements of these *tannaim* and *amoraim* is their clear realization [that] the obligatory fixed prayers of the community reached them as an ancient tradition. . . ."<sup>3</sup> The one exception, which ascribes the prayers to a decree of Rabban Gamliel at Yavneh in the generation after Jerusalem was destroyed, lead Heinemann to conclude that "the creation of the fixed prayers began hundreds of years before the destruction, and reached a stage of consolidation and arrangement . . . in the generation after the destruction." Thus, even if the statements about earlier times have an *aggadic* feel to them because the exact historical circumstances underlying them have been lost, there is no reason to believe that Hazal falsified history simply to

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3. Heinemann, *Ha-Tefilla*, p. 17.

improve the standing of their own prayer-creations. If the obligatory rabbinic blessings and prayers were entirely the creation of the Sanhedrin at Yavneh, as Fleischer believes, and if they were a revolutionary new concept that had to be forcefully imposed on the public and on the rabbinic leadership because neither of them was entirely willing to accept it, and if the debates surrounding the issue were well-known public events (all of these points are central to the way Fleischer describes the scenario), then it is impossible that those very same blessings could have been ascribed to the Patriarchs or to Moses or to the returnees from Babylon so close upon the living memory of the actual circumstances of their creation at Yavneh. Fleischer is absolutely correct that the statements attributing the daily prayers to early times have an *aggadic* feel (How could they not?), but Heinemann shows better sense by treating these statements seriously on their own terms, and by concluding that in the minds of Hazal, their type of prayer began sometime far back in history.

In terms of the supposed lack of evidence about public prayer in synagogues while the Second Temple stood, it must be immediately stated that most of the sources Fleischer quotes can be easily interpreted in a different sense than he explains them. These is especially true for *all* of the verses he quotes from the Gospels, without a single exception. For those readers to whom mention of the Christian Bible in this context is surprising, let me explain. There are only a limited number of literary sources from which we can draw historical information about Jewish history during the Second Temple period. Hazal themselves were not chiefly concerned with recording history *per se*, though they preserved many traditions of historical value that were later recorded in the Talmud and midrashim. Besides rabbinic literature, there are the Greek writings of Philo and Josephus, the Hebrew and Aramaic writings discovered in modern times at the caves of Qumran (the "Dead Sea Scrolls"), and some other scattered writings and inscriptions. In addition to the above, the early Christians preserved many stories that are told against the backdrop of life in Judea before the Temple's destruction, and often they unwittingly reveal details about what life was like at the time. However, as historical material the Gospels must be utilized with caution (as must any extraneous textual evidence). The early Christians were deeply critical of the rabbinic leadership, of the Temple establishment, and of general Jewish religiosity at the time; their criticism often bordered on hatred. This is especially troubling for religious Jews, perhaps because the most fundamental attitude we share is a deep respect for Hazal and unequivocal trust in their intellectual honesty and their moral integrity. Risking exaggeration, it might be said that the early Christians had exactly the opposite bias! But how this bias is understood has direct ramifications for the use of many passages in the Gospels as historical evidence. This will be particularly true for the way Fleischer uses the evidence.

Fleischer quotes fifteen (!) verses about visits by Jesus or his disciples to synagogues in the Land of Israel, and he points out that every one of them mentions preaching and Bible study, but none of them mentions prayer (pp. 404–406). Later, he collects nine more verses describing visits to diaspora synagogues by Paul and his cohorts in exactly the same way (pp. 409–410).

This is meant to prove that while communal prayer may have taken place regularly in the Jerusalem Temple, it was not a common activity in synagogues.

However, none of this constitutes even the slightest positive indication that Fleischer is correct. Since Jesus and his disciples were only visiting these synagogues to spread their teachings and influence the masses with their beliefs, it is not surprising that the verses focus on preaching and not praying. Furthermore, Fleischer himself quotes numerous examples of how the early Christians idealized private prayer in locations far from human contact, and despised the Pharisees for praying in public places in order to show off their religiosity. Given this early Christian aversion to prayer in public places, combined with their emphasis on preaching their new gospel in order to win converts, it is not surprising that visits to synagogues by Jesus and his disciples are described in terms of preaching and not prayer. Such texts do not constitute proof (nor even a hint) that public prayer did not take place in synagogues.

Fleischer explains a famous passage from the Sermon on the Mount explicitly mentioning prayer in the synagogue according to his own thesis, but he dismisses its other possible implications far too quickly. Jesus warned, "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matthew 6:5-6, RSV). From the fact that the originator of this passage mentioned the street corners in the same breath as the synagogues, Fleischer concludes that he did not associate prayer with either location. According to Fleischer, the people being criticized in this passage are those who "suddenly got up to pray in an unexpected place, as if they were suddenly pushed by an internal storm, and Jesus despised this public display of overrighteousness." Thus, he takes the passage as a "sharp" indication of "the absolute split between prayer and the synagogue."

On the contrary! It is just as likely that what is being criticized here are Jews who made sure to pray on a regular basis, whether they found themselves in an actual synagogue or not (as in the marketplace). If so, then obligatory prayer *did* exist (contrary to Fleischer), and Jesus criticized those who publicly exhibited their strong obedience to an entrenched religious practice by praying in public places (marketplace or synagogue). In the case of the synagogue, he tried to delegitimize an accepted practice of public prayer by claiming that it was tainted with religious exhibitionism and insincerity (perhaps he felt that people participated as a result of public pressure and not honest devotion), and substituted his own ideal of prayer in isolated places.<sup>4</sup> By reading the same passage Fleischer cites with such

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4. For all that the "love" of one's fellow man was an important part of Jesus's gospel, this passage hints that his love did not extend to his Jewish opponents. He was quick to judge other groups' motivations unfavorably.



certainly as a proof of his claims, but without his preconceptions, one is equally likely to conclude that he is wrong instead of right.

In short, an entire section of Fleischer's paper is filled with supposed proof texts from a major source of knowledge about Second Temple times (the Gospels), but he does not cite a single text truly demonstrating that his thesis is to be preferred. The same is true of other sections in his paper. This problem seems to relate to a note at the beginning of Fleischer's article, where he explained the following methodological point to his readers and made an unusual request of them:

The structure built out of [individual] proofs necessarily includes, alongside the central and important arguments, also marginal circumstantial proofs which even the author knows may be explained in other ways. The common practice to grab these marginal issues, make them central, undermine their value as evidence, and to think that the central thesis is disproved by this—does not assist in discovering the truth. The fundamental assumptions for complicated issues are not the products of one proof, but the collective result of many proofs. One who doubts the contribution of one argument or another of those mentioned below to the main thesis of the essay will do well to ignore it, and will [instead] pay objective attention to the remaining ones.

There may be some merit to the methodology that Fleischer describes here, but what he asks of his readers is too much in the context of his own essay. Is an entire section such as the one on the Gospels really "marginal" if it quotes two dozen texts for which there is no convincing reason to interpret even one of them Fleischer's way?

Earlier I wrote that the part of the article devoted to showing that early synagogues were not regularly used for community prayer is the strongest part of Fleischer's paper. Indeed, some of his proofs are stronger than the ones from the Christian Bible. For instance, his point about the Theodotus inscription is particularly striking, though again it is not conclusive. That

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And yet, truly loving others must include giving them the benefit of the doubt. Hazal expressed this ideal when they said that "He who judges his fellow favorably—he is judged favorably [by God]" (*Shabbat* 127b) and considered doing so to be a positive commandment of the Torah (*Shavuot* 30a); they also revealed something deep about human nature when they said that whoever finds fault with others really points out a fault in himself (see *Kiddushin* 70a). Jesus himself is reported to have taught these ideas as well. See Matthew 7:1–5. (I am grateful to the editor for drawing my attention to this passage.)

Having said this, Jesus's view of public prayer (if I have understood the verse correctly) is simplistic. A more complex view of public prayer (one giving halakhic Judaism "the benefit of the doubt") would consider that it might have great value despite the fact that some people whose religiosity is crude may use it to parade their supposed piety. For a positive Jewish answer to the problem Jesus raised, see section D of the second additional reading at the end of this book.

inscription describes how Theodotus built the synagogue on which the inscription is found "for reading the Torah and studying the mitzvot, and the hall and the rooms and the water apparatus for accommodating visitors who have need of them."<sup>5</sup> There is no mention here of prayer.

Fleischer justifiably asks: "No person today, for instance, would even consider defining the various purposes of the synagogue without mentioning prayer first and then all the rest. All the more so not to mention prayer at all!" But consider the opposite possibility: people today use the word "prayer" loosely and include the reading of the Torah within it. A description of a synagogue today might very well call it a "place of prayer and public gathering," not mentioning Torah reading or study even though that also takes place. Just as Torah reading is often eclipsed by prayer today in popular speech, perhaps the reverse was true in Temple times. But this need not mean that either activity was considered unimportant (much less entirely absent) either now or then. Even the Theodotus inscription, striking though it may be for Fleischer's purposes, is no proof that devout Jews did not pray together regularly in the synagogue during Temple times just as they do today.

Thus, prayer may have been just as important as "Torah reading" though the phrase may have been intended to include both. But it is also possible (and this point applies to all of the evidence Fleischer musters showing the synagogue as a place of Torah study and teaching but not of prayer), that while communal prayer was not unknown in synagogues during Temple times, its standing as an aspect of synagogue life may have been less than Torah reading and study. Indeed, Hazal attributed *obligatory* public reading of the Torah to Moses himself, and when they said that Ezra added to the obligation they had a firm basis in the biblical text. Neither of these points is true regarding the communal prayers, which have a fully "rabbinic" flavor. Even today, when the ruling that prayer is a Torah obligation has become the accepted halakhic opinion (thus making prayer *more* important than Torah reading) many Jews who pray daily only come to the synagogue on days when the Torah is read. Synagogues struggle to find a minyan on weekdays, but are flooded by hundreds of observant congregants on the Sabbath, even though these people pray privately every day of the week! Halakhically there is no difference in importance between the Sabbath and weekday prayers; what makes the Sabbath special in the synagogue is that the Torah is read and there is usually a lecture or sermon. This is why so many people come. Thus, the public reading of the Torah may indeed overshadow prayer as the purpose of the synagogue. It is true that nowadays there is a tendency to lump everything together loosely with the word "prayer," but in Second Temple times, everything may have been lumped together as "going to hear the Torah," especially if the latter was

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5. Quoted and discussed in Fleischer, pp. 406–407. A replica of this inscription is on permanent display at the Diaspora Museum on the campus of Tel Aviv University.

considered more important. This need not mean that obligatory public prayer was *absent*.

Fleischer's citations of Philo and Josephus are no more conclusive than his proofs from the Gospels. In the case of Philo specifically, what he says has no bearing at all on the possible uses of rabbinic synagogues for exactly the same reason that the quotes from the Gospels teach us nothing. Philo preferred prayer to be private and take place in isolated places because of his Hellenistic views, which idealize it as a kind of philosophical contemplation. The Gospels preferred private and isolated prayer for a somewhat different reason, but no matter: Neither advocates public prayer in the synagogue because of fundamental assumptions about the nature of ideal prayer. In view of the great variety of views and practices among Jews in the period under discussion, a fact that Fleischer emphasizes several times in his article, it does not seem sensible to cite the absence of public synagogue prayer in the writings of Philo or among the early Christians in an attempt to prove that it was also absent among early rabbinic Jews, who may have had vastly different assumptions about the basic purpose of the activity (as opposed to Philo) or about its ethical validity (as opposed to the Christians). Furthermore, even if I am entirely wrong about the philosophical and/or ethical objections to public prayer by Hellenistic Jews and Christians respectively being the reason why public communal prayer is not emphasized in their writings, the opposite scenario that I described above may still hold: There may have actually been public prayer in the Jewish places of gathering in the diaspora called *proseuche* (Greek for "House of Prayer") even though the sources don't ever mention it,<sup>6</sup> simply because people viewed the Torah reading and the sermon as the primary purpose for coming, and included prayer along with "going to hear the reading of the Torah."

Let me make it clear: In no way do I claim to have "disproved" Fleischer's thesis about the absence of communal prayer in Temple times through my criticisms. A few of his arguments, as we saw, deserve serious consideration even though they are not absolutely conclusive. All I have tried to show is that his conclusions are not nearly as strong as he claims them to be. On the one hand, scholars from now on would do well to keep the possibility of fixed communal prayer's not having existed during Temple times in mind when they do research on the period. But on the other hand, to take Fleischer too seriously and utterly reject the possibility that it did exist may also lead to erroneous conclusions. Huge gaps still remain in our knowledge of Second Temple Judaism, and these gaps are likely to remain forever, at least in part. As research on the period continues, mature caution on matters like these will yield surer results than the kind of brazen intellectual courage advocated by Fleischer.<sup>7</sup>

6. See Fleischer, pp. 408–411, for a full discussion.

7. In his response to Reif, p. 685. One last point on Fleischer's proofs: His complete disassociation of the writings found at Qumran from rabbinic synagogue life during Temple times is not convincing either (pp. 415–416). For a more

## RABBINIC PRAYER AS A FRESH AND ONE-TIME CREATION

The second major thesis Fleischer proposes in his article, however, is far weaker than the first. The first rests on textual proofs that sometimes make a strong impression, even if they don't seem to be conclusive. But the next thesis seems to have no firm basis whatsoever, either in deductive logic or in textual proofs.

Let us grant, for the moment, that Fleischer is entirely correct about two points: (1) That synagogues were not used for regular communal prayer while the Temple stood; and (2) That obligatory rabbinic prayer was a concept freshly created at Yavneh. In truth, I am not willing to concede either point; but we must grant their validity for the sake of argument because Fleischer claims that his next major assertion, namely that rabbinic prayer was instituted with officially binding texts, follows directly from them. Though Fleischer makes this next major assertion with absolute certainty, I submit that if his previous one is too strongly stated, then this next one is doubly so. The reason to doubt his claim is connected to our discussion in the last two chapters of the debate on exactly the same issue between Rambam and his opponents. As we shall see, even though the absolutism of Fleischer's strongly-worded conclusion seems unjustified, his incisive points will actually help us understand the medieval views on this matter in a clearer light (along with Heinemann's as well). Let me explain.

As we said, the latter part of Fleischer's article is devoted to the rabbinic evidence about official prayer texts and their supposed creation. Fleischer actually made two separate claims, though he makes them sound like one:

- (1) The fact that an "official" text was composed at Yavneh (and not just an overall structure) is a *logical consequence* of what Fleischer tried to show earlier, namely that such rabbinic prayer was simply not extant in earlier times;
- (2) The "official text" scenario is the *only way* to convincingly explain the evidence in rabbinic literature.

In my opinion, while the second claim has limited validity, the first is entirely unjustified. In other words, I submit that even if we assume Fleischer is entirely correct about the lack of regular communal prayer while the Temple stood, this has *absolutely no implications* for whether or not an official text was composed at Yavneh in all (or most) of its wording. The second claim, however, is true in the sense that the "official text" assumption can provide a basis for a convincing reading of the relevant rabbinic

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moderate view, see Lawrence Schiffman, *Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), pp. 289–301, and "The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Early History of Jewish Liturgy," in *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity*, ed. L. I. Levine (Philadelphia, American Schools of Oriental Research, 1987), pp. 33–48. While distance from the Temple (either geographical distance or theological distance) may have added impetus to regular public prayer, proximity did not cancel it entirely.

sources. The only problem is with it is that once again Fleischer vastly overstates his case, this time by claiming that the "official text" scenario is the *only* valid way to interpret the rabbinic evidence. Let me fully address each of these two points, one at a time.

Firstly, Fleischer is convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that when the obligatory prayers were created at Yavneh, Rabban Gamliel ordered the composition of an official text that he intended to be binding. Fleischer analyzes many of the same texts as we did in chapter eight, but what truly underlies his thesis is a larger methodological assumption and not a textual proof from the Talmud. On my first reading of his article I was particularly struck by one specific paragraph where he states his major axiom, and I immediately associated it with Rambam's view of the matter. The fundamental importance of what he says in this specific paragraph became even more obvious when Fleischer used it to quote himself (!) in response to criticism of his article. The critic<sup>8</sup> had made the following reasonable point: "I have great doubt about whether what Fleischer proves about the work of Rabban Gamliel and his school would have more fittingly been applied to the general obligation of the blessings of the *Amida*, and not to all the details of their *nosah*." Here is the full original paragraph Fleischer quoted from himself in response to this criticism; as we will see, it has implications not only for understanding Fleischer himself, but for a sharper understanding of Rambam, Rashba, and Heinemann as well:

And this obligation [i.e., prayer] which was imposed upon the community, which was a frequent obligation that required fulfilment through speech—it is absolutely impossible to describe it as abstract, or in principle, or that it was only given a rough measure, or that its language (and thus its contents as well) were left open to the consideration of the person who performed it. Common sense forces us to assume that the prayer was formulated in exact detail (like any mitzva of this type), meaning that it was composed in exactly formulated language, that saying it in the way it was fixed was considered necessary for one who wanted to fulfil his obligation. This must be granted as a necessary corollary to understanding obligatory prayer, because there is no one in the world, even if he is very smart, who can possibly have the saying of eighteen consecutive blessings imposed on him on condition that he formulate them himself, especially according to a preconditioned order, on predetermined topics, and facing predetermined endings of the blessings, all through a "spontaneous" creation of the body of each and every blessing. Whoever has thought of the decree of the sages in this way has not appreciated their full wisdom, and has attributed to them something which is untenable in every way; all the more so for something which was a major innovation, and for a decree obligatory to every individual including uneducated commoners. The conclusion must be that

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8. Reif, p. 685.

what the *baraita* says (*Berakhot* 28b; *Megilla* 17b) about Shimon ha-Pakuli, that he "arranged the eighteen blessings before Rabban Gamliel at Yavneh" means exactly what it sounds like, that the text of the *Amida*, in all of its language, was instituted at the behest of Rabban Gamliel, the president of the high court at Yavneh, by Shimon ha-Pakuli. And all of the strange hair-splitting deductions that scholars have made based on the language of this *baraita* are all unnecessary: Even had this *baraita* never been written, logic would compel us to say that things were this way, and the *baraita* only adds its authentic testimony and the name of the person who was responsible for what happened, whose identity we would not know without the *baraita*.<sup>9</sup>

Such extreme confidence! In his response to the critic, Fleischer immediately adds after the self-quotation that "From this logical consideration which forces itself, in my opinion, on common sense thinking, I return to the talmudic corpus and show that it proves that this is so in its entirety, namely that in the fixed and continual reality reflected by this corpus, Jews say the *Amida* using fixed language, and the sages know it."

Indeed, Fleischer's reading of the rabbinic sources usually makes good sense, and some of his interpretations would probably have been acceptable to Rambam. We will soon return to Fleischer's claim that the rabbinic sources completely prove him right, as this is the second of the two points we mentioned above and we have not yet finished discussing the first. For now, note that Fleischer's reasoning about *why* the rabbinic decree had to be the way he supposes it was (i.e., that it included an exact predetermined text) fits in perfectly with Rambam's underlying conception as we described it in chapter nine. Rambam supposed the prayers *must* have been instituted as exact texts because otherwise they would have been unable to serve those for whom they were instituted: the people who had difficulty expressing themselves in Hebrew. Fleischer's emphasis is slightly different: he writes that spontaneous formulation of themes in a prescribed order is impossible ("no one in the world" can do it, "even if he is very smart"). But both Rambam and Fleischer assume fixed texts *had* to be prescribed because of difficulties people encounter in expressing themselves spontaneously. In fact, in a footnote to the above text, Fleischer hints that "spontaneous" creation of a blessing would have been even harder to do precisely because it was to be done in Hebrew. The conceptual correspondence between Fleischer and Rambam is tight.

But is Fleischer's great confidence about this point really justified? The truth is that Heinemann's opposite scenario is a great deal more "tenable" than Fleischer gives it credit for. In some ways, Fleischer has misrepresented it. It is true that Heinemann denied that one "official" *nosah* was ever composed, but he also wrote that a less creative person would have "used one of the popular *nosahim*, which he learned from others." A person who

9. Fleischer, pp. 426–427; he then again quoted half this paragraph (by himself) in his rejoinder to Reif's rejoinder (above, note 2), *Tarbiz*, p. 685.

prayed could "use, for the main body of the blessing, the *nosah* that he preferred, or which he was used to." In other words, people did *not* improvise the entire prayer every single time (which is indeed impossible). Rather, they created or adopted a *nosah* that they enjoyed and continued to make variations upon it to suit their feelings and needs. Fleischer asks where and how a person could have learned to pray in the first place in such a flexible environment, or how people prayed before they learned the order of all eighteen blessings when there was still no exact text. Because of this problem, which led him to assume Heinemann's scenario was inappropriate for prayer by the masses, Fleischer rejected the "flexible" approach. But there is an obvious solution: undoubtedly, what made the "flexible" decree possible (according to Heinemann) was the institution of the *sheli'ah tzibbur*. Those who did not yet know the order of the blessings or a good *nosah* learned from him, as Heinemann explicitly wrote. Those who continued to be unable to memorize any *nosah*, let alone to make variations on it, simply relied on the *sheli'ah tzibbur* to fulfil their obligation for the rest of their lives. (To fulfil one's obligation by listening to the *sheli'ah tzibbur* was common in talmudic times.) Fleischer entirely ignores the relevance of the *sheli'ah tzibbur* to his basic assumption about the impossibility of public prayer without a single binding text.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, despite his sharp claims, his way of looking at things is not the only one that can be described as "common sense thinking," and it does not "force itself" on the logical mind any more than Heinemann's.

But Fleischer's strong statement of his assumptions about how the prayer

10. For Fleischer's remarks on the *sheli'ah tzibbur*, see "Le-Kadmoniyut," p. 426 n. 66; and another article in the same vein he published three years later: "The *Shemone Esrei*—Its Character, Internal Order, Content and Goals," *Tarbiz* 62, no. 2 (1993): 189–190. Fleischer points out the importance of *sheli'ah tzibbur* in the context of his hypothetical argument between Rabban Gamliel and the *hakhamim*: he posits that because Rabban Gamliel favored public prayer entirely, he made the *sheli'ah tzibbur* more central than the *hakhamim*, who preferred that a person pray on his own if was able to, because they also saw individual prayer as valuable. For the *hakhamim*, a person should only rely on the *sheli'ah tzibbur*'s prayer if he is unable to do otherwise.

It is amazing, though, that Fleischer entirely misses the major implication that the very *existence* of the *sheli'ah tzibbur* has for the validity of his theory: as we said, it makes the fixed text unnecessary even for Rabban Gamliel! And when Heinemann's position is better understood by taking the *sheli'ah tzibbur* into account, it makes all of Fleischer's "proofs" that there was a fixed text based on rabbinic statements bemoaning the lack of *kavvana* and *hiddush* (pp. 430–433) totally irrelevant. Fleischer claims that continual rabbinic demands for *kavvana* prove there *was* a fixed text, because if everything was improvised it would be impossible *not* to have *kavvana*. But this point, far from proving Fleischer correct, only shows that he misunderstood Heinemann's position. What Heinemann actually said was that each person learned a stable *nosah*, presumably from a *sheli'ah tzibbur*, upon which improvisations could be based. But many people would *not* improvise, and they would instead just say their habitual *nosah* by rote with no *kavvana*. This is why the rabbis bemoaned *keva* in prayer, not what Fleischer suggests.

texts originated has a positive benefit: it puts both the underlying assumptions of Rambam (who would probably have agreed with some of Fleischer's points) and the opposite scenario of Heinemann (along with those medieval talmudists who shared his assumptions) into sharper relief. It helps to show that in reality, the entire thousand-year-old argument on whether there was ever an "official" text has much less to do with specific proof texts than with fundamental ideas about human nature and religiosity. The real question is whether, when an average person talks to God, he is continually capable of expressing his own thoughts within a given structure on predetermined themes, or whether he needs to be "fed" the exact words he says to God, at best occasionally adding new ideas in the middle of a standardized text. Which of these two scenarios is most typical of how a religious person prays? If one assumes, as Rambam did, that people require a predetermined text (in his case, because he believed that rabbinic fixed prayer was a concession to reality and a tool to overcome ignorance), then he will be led to the latter conclusion. But if he assumes that prayer is a personal conversation with God, and that people are truly capable of improvising conversation with God even within a predetermined structure, he will accept the former scenario. As Moshe Greenberg pointed out (see chapter four), the latter was certainly the major characteristic of biblical prayer. Anyone could pour out his heart to God, formulating his words spontaneously, but within the real structure of speech in analogous human situations.

I candidly admit that I prefer Heinemann's scenario because it was borne out in my personal experience praying, and not just because of any detached and supposedly "objective" analysis of the sources. Apparently my own "common sense" is exactly the opposite of Fleischer's on this issue, because I know that he is absolutely wrong in terms of my own experience. After I learned to say a *nosah* of the *Amida* by heart (which Heinemann's scenario completely allows for) I found no difficulty rephrasing things and still conforming to the structure of the blessings. I am confident that many others are capable of doing the exactly the same. Those who cannot, and must rely on the printed siddur instead, are really no different from those who relied on the *sheli'ah tzibbur* in the time of Hazal.<sup>11</sup>

So there is no "objective" basis whatsoever to Fleischer's claim that the (supposed) creation of fixed communal prayer by Rabban Gamliel at Yavneh points directly to a fixed *nosah*. Even if the first idea is true it says absolutely nothing about the second one, because Heinemann's description of the "flexible" scenario can fit in just as easily (and perhaps even easier). It is now time to consider the second point we mentioned earlier, namely Fleischer's claim that the "official text" thesis must be correct because "the

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11. Despite Fleischer's skepticism, I personally found that Heinemann's scenario for how rabbinic prayer could be learned by individuals in a flexible environment to be tenable, sensible, and practical in my own life. See my remarks about how I learned to pray without a siddur in chapter twelve, note 19.



talmudic corpus . . . proves that this is so in its entirety. . . . Jews say the *Amida* using fixed language, and the sages know it." Is this truly so?

There is no point in discussing Fleischer's interpretation of every one of the texts that he cites, because he himself admits that all of them have been discussed numerous times in the scholarly literature, even by scholars who rejected the "official text" thesis. Fleischer does not view his major contribution to be important new interpretations of specific sources, but to show that when all the evidence is read together as he presents it (along with the supposed implications of the absence of regular public prayer before the destruction of Jerusalem), the "talmudic corpus" can only be read his way.

Now, we have already made it clear that the suggested absence of synagogue prayer during Temple times actually has no implications either for or against the "official text" thesis. Both sides of the question remain equally valid, even if Fleischer is correct about the first point. We also noted earlier that the rabbinic evidence is not entirely one-sided, even though Fleischer presents it as such; rather, he simply dismisses the contrary talmudic statements as *aggadic*. Furthermore, all of the explicit talmudic discussions allowing for textual variations (or even encouraging them) are explained by Fleischer as the impact of the views of those scholars who opposed Rabban Gamliel's legislation. This is a reasonable explanation of contrary evidence according to his "official text" thesis, but given the existence of these sources, how can it be said that "the talmudic corpus . . . proves that this is so in its entirety"? On the contrary, the talmudic evidence is ambiguous and contradictory, and this has caused continuous debate about its meaning for the better part of a millennium (as we saw in chapters eight and nine). Thus, how can it be said to positively prove anything at all? Fleischer's "official text" thesis may not be wrong, but not a single text that he cites proves that it is right.

This is not the forum to fully address all of Fleischer's source-interpretations. But to give the reader a better idea of what I mean, let us limit our consideration to how Fleischer deals with the same talmudic examples of flexibility in prayer texts that we studied in chapter eight. For every passage, Fleischer's interpretation is one of two equally-valid readings, or else a weak but still possible interpretation.

First of all, recall the famous passage we read in chapter eight about the students of Rabbi Eliezer, who complained to their teacher that various *shelihei tzibbur* either took too much time or too little (*Berakhot* 50a). In response, Rabbi Eliezer told them how on one occasion Moses prayed using only five short words, while at another time he prayed for forty days and forty nights. In other words, there is no right or wrong length for prayer. It all depends on the person and the circumstances, and the only thing that really matters is sincerity. We would do well to say that Rabbi Eliezer's point here was that "It is the same whether one does more or less, as long as he directs his heart to heaven."<sup>12</sup>

12. On this, see chapter twelve, note 16.

But Fleischer stands this simple interpretation on its head!<sup>13</sup> In his view, Rabbi Eliezer was perhaps the central figure opposing Rabban Gamliel's fixed text. His students, who knew this, pointed out to their teacher that a flexible text can lead to ridiculous results if the *sheli'ah tzibbur* doesn't know how to reach an acceptable medium length. Fleischer writes that "even though their master tries to find merit for his view and his *hazzanim*, it is clear that he doesn't really confront the central issue." He further suggests that "perhaps the matter was preserved in the literature to show the [untenable] practical results of this view."

However, when *aggadic* stories about rabbis and their students are told, it is usually because the rabbi makes a deep and fundamental point that his students have missed. In this case the message is that quality has meaning for prayer and not quantity, and that one should therefore think twice before criticizing a *hazzan* simply for his length. It is natural that *hazzanim* will vary in a large degree. But for Fleischer, the teacher has no real message here, and the passage may only have been recorded for the criticism of the students, to which their master has no real reply. As usual, which interpretation is right can never be proven. But common sense (to use a favorite term of Fleischer's) seems to indicate that talmudic stories about rabbis are usually recorded because the rabbis have something of importance to say.

Similarly, reconsider the passage immediately following the above story in the Talmud: "From a person's blessings it becomes evident whether he is a scholar or an ignoramus" (*Berakhot* 50a). Fleischer writes that this passage reflects "the general involvement of a person in the world of blessings . . . and nothing at all can be learned from this about the obligation of a scholar to improvise in his tefilla."<sup>14</sup> He then notes that anyone who has ever prayed knows that even a fixed text can be stretched or shortened (by how quickly one says the words), and that even with a fixed text one can tell if the person who has said it is educated or not. All of this is undoubtably true, but why can "nothing" be learned from this talmudic passage when the Talmud's following examples are of various linguistic options, the choice of which is revealing about a person's attitudes?<sup>15</sup>

I have saved the most important example for last, namely Rabbi Eliezer's rejection of *keva* in prayer, which we discussed at length in chapter eight. As we saw, this talmudic passage has always been central to the debate over the "official" text, and Fleischer could not avoid dealing with it either. Remember that for Ginzburg, who accepted Finkelstein's idea of the fixed text, *keva* meant a fixed "official text" and Rabbi Eliezer simply rejected the validity of any fixed text for prayer outright. This is opposed to interpre-

13. Fleischer, "Le-Kadmoniyut," p. 429.

14. *Ibid.*, n. 78.

15. Fleischer could draw attention to the fact that the examples are cited in name of Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi, whom he claims was sympathetic to the "flexible" view that had gained currency in his times. But this is most certainly more "forced" than how Heinemann uses the passage.

tations offered by rabbis in the gemara, according to whom Rabbi Eliezer did not *disagree* with the preceding opinions requiring the recitation of certain fixed blessings, but emphasized that saying those blessings must not be allowed to deteriorate into insincere rote recitation. Heinemann adopted the attitude expressed by the rabbis in the gemara, whereby Rabbi Eliezer's rejection of *keva* was a rejection of insincere recitation, not a fundamental rejection of a supposed "official text." For Heinemann, none of the rabbis required an exact text (not even Rabban Gamliel), but all of them (including Rabbi Eliezer) required a fixed overall structure, and Rabbi Eliezer merely warned against the dangers inherent in a structure that he himself accepted, namely the danger that people would learn one particular wording and repeat it over and over again on their own accord without *hiddush*. In short, Ginzburg's assumption of a fixed text led him to believe that Rabbi Eliezer opposed the existence of that text when he rejected *keva*, while Heinemann believed that there was no such thing as a fixed text and Rabbi Eliezer was only afraid of the dangers inherent in a fixed structure.

Fleischer prefers Ginzburg's interpretation for obvious reasons.<sup>16</sup> He realizes that Rabbi Eliezer could not possibly have rejected the entire institution of fixed prayer since he implicitly accepted the validity of such prayer in other talmudic passages. Instead, he posits that while Rabbi Eliezer was willing to accept the overall structure of the blessings, he rejected the binding nature of Rabban Gamliel's official text for them. This fits in well with his claim that of all the rabbis at Yavneh, it was Rabbi Eliezer who was the major "opponent" of Rabban Gamliel's decree.<sup>17</sup>

Fleischer then notes that Heinemann's interpretation of the passage was "forced," but does not elaborate. It seems that Fleischer finds it "forced" only because it does not fit into his thesis, despite the fact that the interpretation of *keva* in the later talmudic tradition is on Heinemann's side.<sup>18</sup>

Fleischer finds it convenient to assume that Rabbi Eliezer was the most prominent figure on the "opposing" side in his hypothetical controversy about the validity of fixed texts at Yavneh, a controversy that he was forced to assume existed in order to explain the wealth of rabbinic statement about the value of personal expression in prayer. For Fleischer, these statements all derive from rabbinic personalities who opposed Rabban Gamliel's decree in one degree or another. However, an entirely different scenario is no more "forced": Since there is no explicit reference to such a major debate anywhere, perhaps the debate never took place at all. Perhaps all of the rabbis, as Heinemann assumed, accepted the idea of prayer with a fixed structure but without binding words. But not all religious personalities are of the

16. Fleischer, *ibid.*, no. 75; and "The *Shemone Esrei*," pp. 179–223, especially p. 197, no. 75.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 197.

18. The gemara has four opinions, as we discussed in chapter one, of which only one is about textual *hiddush*. But the fundamental point is that *none* of these opinions assume Rabbi Eliezer argues with the other *tannaim*.

same mold; some rabbis were more sensitive than others to the potential for rote recitation inherent in fixed structures and times for prayers and more concerned about that danger, while others instead emphasized the important merits of prayer within a fixed overall structure. Rabbi Eliezer happened to be the personality most concerned about the dangers of *keva* in fixed prayer, and he often took pains to point out those dangers. His important views were thus recorded in the mishna as points that were accepted by all, just as the idea of a fixed structure for the blessings was accepted by all in principle. These differences in emphasis need not have been fundamental halakhic disputes, as Fleischer claims they were. Indeed, there is no record about any explicit rejection of Rabbi Eliezer's views by halakhists from mishnaic times until this very day, just as there is no rejection of the halakhic structure for blessings. Both points are accepted since they are not contradictory.

So when Fleischer rejects Heinemann's interpretation of the passage as "forced," the negative description is entirely on the basis of his own assumptions, and because he works from within the entirely valid scenario he himself created to explain the origins of rabbinic prayer. But with different assumptions, others will arrive at the opposite view of which interpretation is really more "forced"; indeed, Heinemann wrote that Ginzburg's interpretation was quite difficult to accept, and more "forced" (the very same Hebrew term!) than his own.<sup>19</sup> But the underlying truth is that if we simply take the passage on its own terms without preconceptions, either reading is equally valid.

This is a perfect illustration of the essential problem with Fleischer's claim that he has "proven" the "official text" theory: All of his rabbinic "proofs" have been studied for centuries, including massive discussion by modern scholars, but no one has ever been able to decide the "official text" question one way or the other based on them. Not one of the texts he quotes can really decide the issue. Fleischer says that instead of focusing on individual proof texts, we should keep the overall picture in mind (and then, he claims, it will be clear that he is right). But unfortunately, as we have seen, even the overall picture seems no more clear than it was before Fleischer's article appeared.

## TWO VALID VIEWS ONCE AGAIN

In conclusion, while it seems that Fleischer's article proves much less than he wants it to, it still achieves something extremely important. It may not succeed in proving that the "loose structure" view of the prayers' origin is wrong, and that the "official text" scenario is the *only* way of reading the rabbinic sources. In this, Fleischer succeeds no more than Heinemann did in his reverse attempt to utterly disqualify the "official text" idea. The bottom line is that the rabbinic evidence remains ambiguous and contradictory (as

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19. Heinemann, p. 78.

Fleischer himself points out at the beginning of his article). Furthermore, we saw that regardless of whether Fleischer is right or wrong when he attributes the creation of fixed communal prayer solely to the rabbinic leadership at Yavneh, the point has absolutely no implications either way for the question of whether or not that leadership composed an "official" *nosah*. The "flexible structure" view of prayer can fit into the scenario just as easily as (and perhaps easier than) Fleischer's assumption that rigid texts were composed at Yavneh.

But in my opinion, Fleischer inadvertently succeeded in doing something even deeper than "solving" the "official text" debate: After decades of absolute hegemony by the "loose structure" view, he has really shown that *neither* approach can be disqualified. Even if his proofs for a rigid text had been more convincing, Fleischer's victory would ultimately have been a hollow one—it might have taken ten or twenty years, perhaps even fifty, but eventually an influential scholar would have come along to push the pendulum back in Heinemann's direction. The debate would have continued forever because of one absolute and undeniable fact, a fact that Fleischer candidly admitted at the beginning of his article and which I have repeatedly shown to be true in the past two chapters: the primary sources on this issue are ambiguous. The material we are forced to work with is simply not sufficient to allow for any definite conclusions. Rather than letting the scholarly pendulum swing back and forth for another hundred years as it has for the past century, let us simply admit once and for all that there are two valid possibilities. The fact that the greatest rabbinic scholars discussed this exact problem for the greater part of a thousand years and never arrived at a consensus, as we saw in chapter eight, should make us more humble when we approach it ourselves.

Lest those who are convinced about Fleischer's absolute conclusions accuse me of being "agnostic" regarding this issue, or of trying to stand in the way of productive scholarship,<sup>20</sup> I do not think that discussion about the origins of rabbinic prayer has to stop. Being fully aware that the two definite possibilities will always remain need not stand in the way of further scholarly investigation about Jewish prayer from *either* perspective! Rather, let us see which of the two approaches bears more fruit in the long run as *both* are utilized to the fullest.<sup>21</sup>

20. Fleischer makes both these accusations in his response to his critic, p. 685.

21. It is in this sense that I applaud Fleischer's more recent article "The *Shemone Esrei*—Its Character, Internal Order, Content and Goals" (above, note 10). Here, Fleischer approaches the central problems of the *Shemone Esrei* based on his own views about the circumstances of its origin, and spells out a number of important original ideas. He concludes that his basic thesis, which we have described in this Afterword, "not only has . . . not burdened us as we went to find answers to the cardinal questions of the study of the *Amida*, but on the contrary has cleared the way to simple, clear solutions, even for questions that until now no solution had been found for them. The fact that one basic assumption has served us as a key to many doors, and has opened many rusty locks for us, proves that it is a good and true key" (p. 223).

For the purposes of this book, which is concerned with the practical question of making Jewish prayer a serious religious experience (something which the halakha undoubtedly requires according to every interpretation), I think Heinemann's position must be preferred. Not because it is "objectively" the correct thesis (I hope it is clear by now that such statements are only detrimental!) but because *even according to Fleischer* it accurately describes the kind of prayer envisioned by those who compiled the mishna and the gemara. Fleischer admitted that many of Rabban Gamliel's contemporaries disagreed with his rigid forms for prayer, and their views were also recorded in the mishna. He even wrote: "The fact that Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi included the views of scholars who urged *mitpallelim* not to make their prayers *keva*, and these are words that imply indirect censure of one who repeats the text of his prayer as a mechanical act, shows that in his generation there was a tendency among the scholars to emphasize that the texts of the fixed prayers were not binding in nature, and to view deviations from them positively."<sup>22</sup>

This point by Fleischer holds the seeds of a fascinating implication

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I fully agree with the methodological sentiments expressed here, whereby the validity of a thesis is given backing by showing that it effectively explains other relevant problems, and I hope both sides of the debate will continue to do this. However, it must be clearly stated that while Fleischer suggests a number of very appealing ideas about the *Amida* in this article, he (once again) highly overstates their dependence on his basic assumption! In fact, most of the excellent ideas in the article are perfectly valid even according to Heinemann's scenario, which rejects the theory that an "official text" was composed at Yavneh. Most of the points relate to the overall structure and themes of the *Amida*, not to its *nosah*. Fleischer's fine insight about the absence of *malhut* ("King of the World") in the *Amida* being linked to its "national" character (p. 191) would be acceptable even if the *nosah* for the main text of the blessing was flexible. (Fleischer's note [p. 191 n. 44] that the inability to insert *malhut* after its final arrangement at Yavneh does not fit Heinemann's own thesis is simply not true: the *hatimot* had much more stability earlier on according to Heinemann, and certainly something as important as *malhut* would have been hard to change.)

His conjecture that the twelve middle blessings are entirely national in character, the first six for improvement of the nation's present condition and the next six for its eschatological redemption is quite attractive (pp. 198–199); I am personally biased towards it because it fits in so nicely with the rabbinic version of the "social analogy" that I described in chapter four. But it has nothing to do with a fixed *nosah* for these twelve blessings. The same is true for Fleischer's point that the themes of the *Amida* are entirely non-mystical, that it keeps entirely to the biblical view of God and that mystical ideas were probably kept out of it consciously (pp. 207–208). Even Fleischer's theory about how the origins of the *kedusha* and how it reached its present form (210–223) has nothing whatsoever to do with the idea that Rabban Gamliel ordained a fixed wording for the third blessing. The theory is no more or less tenable if it is assumed that just the theme of the blessing was prescribed, and not its exact words. In short, while I admire many of the ideas Fleischer proposes in the article, I am skeptical as to whether his "key" was really necessary to open the door to them. Maybe more than one key fits.

22. Fleischer, "Le-Kadmoniyut," p. 437.

related to our discussion of "Prayer as a Fixed Text" among post-talmudic authorities in chapter eight. If Fleischer is correct that the friction between rote and meaning in Jewish (rabbinic) prayer began at one precise historical moment in the clash of opinions among the scholars at Yavneh, then consider the following: Since the problem was never fully resolved at Yavneh, the Talmud recorded ambiguous and contradictory views on it. The fact that the Talmud itself was ambiguous led to debates and opposing opinions on the matter among its later rabbinic interpreters. Most recently, modern academic scholars picked up on the problem. In this way, an institutional struggle on a specific topic that began nearly two thousand years ago has continued unabated to this day! And if Fleischer is *not* correct that the debates about *keva* having began at Yavneh, then the friction between *keva* and *kavvana* is even older.

To fully conclude chapters eight and nine, as well as this Afterword, let us simply state that the Talmud, as we have shown in this book, is filled with examples of flexible prayer texts and contains many admonitions about not letting prayer become rote repetition. Regardless of whatever current opinion about the origins of prayer may be in vogue among academic scholars, one thing is clear: the halakha as reflected in the Talmud cannot be said to forbid *hiddush* in prayer (even Rambam couldn't find a clear prohibition for it, as we saw in chapter nine), and according to the majority of its interpreters such *hiddush* is fully permissible and even praiseworthy. After the fascinating but somewhat involved issues that we have discussed in the last two chapters, this positive attitude towards *hiddush*, talking to God in our own words, must be our practical conclusion. It will play an important role as we try to find practical ways to bring *kavvana* back into Jewish prayer.

# *The Triumph of the Fixed Prayer-Book and Its Ramifications for Meaningful Prayer*

## RAMBAM ON PRAYER AND THE HEBREW LANGUAGE

Rambam's *Mishneh Torah* had an enormous impact on popular Jewish beliefs. Its authority was so great, and it was so widely studied, that many of the opinions expressed there by Rambam later became "common knowledge" among Jews, even when those opinions were not the dominant ones among rabbis in his own time.

Take, for example, the Messianic attitudes expressed in the *Mishneh Torah*. All literate Jews are familiar with the rationalistic, non-supernatural opinions Rambam expressed about the Messiah himself and the Messianic Age. For instance, he wrote: "Do not think that the King Messiah must perform (miraculous) signs and wonders, or change the way of the world or revive the dead, or any other similar things. . . . It is not possible that in the days of the Messiah that something in the natural way of the world will end or that there will be something new in Creation. Rather, the world will continue in its natural course . . ." (*Laws of Kings* 11:3 and 12:1).

It is likely that this view was not dominant in Rambam's own time, nor in the eras that preceded him. Nor did his statements quell learned debate on these matters—on the contrary, they sparked lively medieval discussions. (In fact Ra'avad, Rambam's major critic, rejected Rambam's "natural" description of the Messianic world quoted above by simply asking: "But doesn't the Torah say 'I will rid the land of evil beasts'?" ) However, Rambam's influence was so powerful that despite any contrary opinions, any learned Jew would immediately think of the above passage first when he pondered what the End of Days might be like.

Rambam's view on the origins of rabbinic prayer had similar influence. There seems to be no source whatsoever in rabbinic literature for the motivation he ascribes to the creators of the fixed prayers (this motivation was the main subject of chapter nine), yet his description is accepted *de facto*



by all traditional Jews to this day. Let us review Rambam's influential description of the origin of the tefillot, which we studied at length in chapter nine:

(4) When Israel was exiled in the days of evil Nebuchadnezzar, they were mixed among the Persians and the Greeks and the rest of the nations, and children were born to them in the lands of the other nations. But the language of those children was corrupt, each one's speech being a mixture of many languages. And when one of them would speak, he couldn't express what he needed to in one language without mixing it up, as the verse says, "Their children spoke half Ashdodite, and they didn't remember how to speak the Jewish tongue. They spoke the languages of other nations. . . ." (Nehemiah 11:24)

(5) Because of this, when one of them would pray, his tongue was not able to express his needs, or to praise the Holy One, blessed is He, in the holy tongue, without mixing in other languages.

(6) When Ezra and his court realized this, they rose to institute eighteen blessings in order for them. The first three are praise to God, the last three are thanksgiving, and in the middle ones are requests for everything: they are general categories for the needs of each person, and for the needs of the entire community. This was for the blessings to be on the tip of everyone's tongue, and for them to learn them quickly, so that the prayer of these untrained people would be as complete as the prayer of those with eloquent tongues. And because of this they established all of the blessings and prayers that all Israel know fluently, so that every matter would become a set blessing in the mouth of an untutored man.

Among learned traditional Jews, the perception about the origins of the prayers has been molded almost entirely by the above statement, but the source for Rambam's opinion is not positively known, as we learned in chapter nine. However, even if Rambam's description of the origins of our prayers was based on his intuition alone, that intuition was sharp and clear. The desire to keep *lashon ha-kodesh* (the Holy Language) alive and in use was undoubtedly a major reason for prayer eventually to become frozen in a fixed text.<sup>1</sup> Of course, Rambam described this as happening initially, when the blessings were first enacted in Ezra's time. He was of the opinion, after all, that they were formulated word for word from the very beginning, as we saw in chapter nine. But his basic explanation is cogent even for those

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1. According to Rabbi Nahum Rabinovitch, this passage in *Mishneh Torah* describes a massive educational venture by Ezra's leadership during a painful transition at a crucial juncture in Jewish history. Ezra's effort during the era of the first return to Zion has great implications for the revival of Judaism in the State of Israel today. See Rabinovitch's "Ahavat Yisrael" in *Jewish Tradition and the Non-Traditional Jew*, ed. Jacob J. Schachter (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc. 1990). An expanded Hebrew version of the article appeared in *Tehumin* 11 (1990): 41–72.

like Heinemann (and possibly Rashba) who assume that the texts of the blessings solidified during later centuries, well after the close of the Talmud.

Heinemann, too, was convinced that the Hebrew language itself had a lot to do with the "hardening" of prayer after talmudic times. In his discussions on the topic<sup>2</sup> he always emphasized this as the primary factor. Even though the halakha permitted individuals to pray in any language they understood, Jews rarely made use of this "leniency." Instead, they chose to say the prayers in Hebrew, even if they didn't understand the language. Realizing this truth led one commentator on the *Shulhan Arukh* to a radical conclusion when he wrote that anyone who prays other than in Hebrew should be rebuked harshly, "so that he will not abandon the ways of the community that have been accepted throughout all of Israel's dispersion for ages to specifically say the *nosah* of prayer in Hebrew, whereby he fulfils his obligation even if he doesn't understand. And one who wants to be careful about the words of the *Sefer Hasidim* [who recommended praying in other languages if one doesn't know Hebrew] can easily learn the overall meaning; there is no need to know the meaning of every word."<sup>3</sup> Whether the author of this passage is correct that non-Hebrew prayer can be *forbidden* to individuals based on its general non-acceptance in the wider community is certainly open to question (after all, the "leniency" was always meant for individuals, not communities). But his description of the overall situation is certainly accurate. The fact that Jews everywhere clung to Hebrew prayer (and were united by it), often sacrificing understanding for identification with the People of Israel and its language, is a great historical expression of their deep attachment to the Holy Tongue.

There is little doubt that if Hebrew had not been used as the language of

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2. Heinemann wrote two extremely brief informal discussions about why prayer became ever more fixed, especially after the time of Hazal. One discussion is in an extended footnote to his essay "Ha-Tefilla be-Mahshavat Hazal" (Jerusalem Amaha, 1960), pp. 16–17. This is quoted in Issachar Jacobson, *Netiv Binah*, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Sinai, n.d.), pp. 36–37. The second discussion appears in "Keva ve-Hiddush ba-Tefilla ha-Yehudit" in Cohn, pp. 82–84. My discussion expands on these.

Heinemann's ideas on the subject are not original; most of his suggestions were also made previously by Elbogen, especially about the impact of kabbalistic beliefs. Elbogen discusses the "hardening" of prayer texts and customs in his chapter on the emergence of the siddur (pp. 265–280). In particular, he describes the impact of printing on the "hardening" of the text in pp. 279–280.

Elbogen had strong biases against the kabbala, which he considered to be a deviation from normative Judaism with a mostly detrimental impact on Jewish history. His negative attitude towards kabbala is typical of classical *Wissenschaft* scholars, an attitude which Gershom Scholem often criticized. In pp. 281–291 he discussed the impact of the kabbala on *tefilla* at length, charging that it usually served to stifle textual creativity and was also responsible for introducing superstitious beliefs connected with prayer.

3. *Yad Ephraim*, end of *Orah Hayyim* 101. It should be made clear that *Yad Ephraim's* main objection is not the general rejection of non-Hebrew prayer, but that translations of the siddur are bound to be inaccurate. This objection has its roots in a passage by Rambam; for a full discussion see above, chapter nine, note 10.

public prayer and Bible study (i.e., reading the Torah), the language would not have survived our 2000-year-long exile from our land, to finally be revived as a spoken language in the State of Israel during this century. This is obvious to anyone who thinks about it. When I did a short stint as a chaplain candidate in the U.S. Army, I once asked my boss (a fundamentalist Christian) why, if he believed that many passages in the Christian Bible recorded the actual words of Jesus, he didn't study Greek so that he could read what he considered to be God's word in the original?<sup>4</sup> His reply was, "We don't feel the way about Greek that you feel about Hebrew. For you, Hebrew is a liturgical language: You use it! You pray in it, and you read the Torah in it. But we don't use Greek for anything."

Because Hebrew was kept alive as a written language for prayer and Torah study, it also served to unite the exiled Jewish people throughout the diaspora. Jews who lived far from each other and spoke different languages communicated in Hebrew. Rambam himself noted that no rabbinic work could be useful to the entire Jewish people unless it was in Hebrew. He therefore decided to write *Mishneh Torah* in Hebrew rather than Judeo-Arabic, the language he wrote his other works in; he later lamented not having written his other compositions in Hebrew as well.<sup>5</sup> In general, many wonderful books of rabbinic scholarship, popular lore, poetry and prayer were written in other Jewish languages such as Judeo-Arabic, Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), and Yiddish (Judeo-German). But these works were only able to influence and inspire those Jews who spoke the languages they were written in; they remained entirely closed for the rest of the Jewish people unless they were later translated into Hebrew. As the number of Jews who speak these languages dwindles today, many of these works are now becoming lost to the Jewish people as a whole.

Thus, the fact that Hebrew was preserved by all Jews as a liturgical language and as the textual language of Torah study is crucial from a historical perspective. This fact served to unite the Jews as a single people throughout all the lands of their dispersion, as we said. It also united the Jewish people over time: by knowing enough Hebrew to study the Bible and rabbinic texts, Jews could feel at home discussing the ideas of scholars who lived centuries and even millennia before them, making Torah study a continual discussion lasting throughout all of the generations. The preservation of Hebrew as the language of prayer and Torah study further served as the basis for the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language in modern times. However, this fact also had an enormous impact on the nature of Jewish prayer: as Jews became less able to express themselves in Hebrew during *tefilla*, they instead turned to fixed texts of the blessings. (These were later written, forming the basis for the *siddur*.) This meant that the aspect of *recitation* in *tefilla* became more prominent, while the aspect of *communi-*

4. Of course, Jesus probably spoke Aramaic like most of the Jews in the Land of Israel during his time. But the Greek text is the closest extant witness to what he said.

5. *Iggeret ha-Rambam*, pp. 222–223, 408–409, 557–558.

cation with God became more difficult to achieve. It may be said that, overall, the Jewish people chose to sacrifice praying to God in their own words out of their great love for the Hebrew language.

## INCREASING STANDARDIZATION

It is worthwhile to consider several other factors that, according to Heinemann, also contributed to rigidly fixing our prayer-texts. How is it, he asked, that while Hazal felt innovation was just as essential to *tefilla* as following the basic structure of the blessings, in our day prayer is almost entirely a rote activity? In chapter one we learned that Hazal considered "saying something new" to be part of an ideal *tefilla*. Why was this idea abandoned?

One factor Heinemann mentions is that Babylonian *amoraim* tended to try to standardize all areas of behavior in an absolute fashion; it was impossible that they would exempt such an important area as prayer. (This was opposed to the trend in Eretz Yisrael during talmudic and geonic times, where liturgical practices remained fluid much longer.)<sup>6</sup> Later *posekim* expanded on this attitude until it eventually reached the point where every word in a blessing became a matter worthy of halakhic analysis.

## SCRIBES, PUBLISHERS, AND PRAYING THE "RIGHT" WAY

Another factor in the increasing standardization of prayer texts: When the blessings began to be written down during in geonic times, this inevitably led to the standardization of their texts. People who needed to hire scribes to copy a siddur for them were obviously no longer fluent enough to use their own words for blessings.<sup>7</sup> This fits in well with Rabbi Zeira's attitude

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6. Many manuscripts of tefillot were discovered in the Cairo Geniza. They all convey the same general themes but there seems to be no uniformity in the wording of the blessings. This indicates that the texts of the prayers remained fluid in the region. For examples, see Heinemann, *Ha-Tefilla*, pp. 48–51.

There also seems to have been no completely standardized schedule for reading the Torah in Eretz Yisrael, as opposed to Bavel where it was read once a year according to a set system. In Eretz Yisrael, a Jew from one city never knew for sure what section might be read in another community.

7. This argument is not entirely cogent as it stands. In Eretz Yisrael itself the proof for the late "fluidity" of the blessings is also from written documents! This shows that written prayers, by themselves, do not necessarily indicate "hardening" of the text. What Heinemann probably meant is that in Bavel, the first siddurim were composed in response to inquiries about the "correct" text. Communities that made such inquiries were certainly fertile ground for the creation of "hard" texts. Thus, it is not the *existence* of written documents that indicate hardening so much as the *promotion* of them as "official" texts. In Eretz Yisrael, no one text seems to have been accepted as the only "correct" version.

in the Talmud: he agreed that “to say something new” was part of an ideal *tefilla*, but he found that doing so confused him and he made mistakes in his prayers (so he stopped). Confusion during the recitation of *tefillot*, which mitigated against “saying something new” in them, also led to the blessings finally being written down as prescribed texts.

Later on, the invention of printing accelerated this process. When a Jew picked up a published siddur, he tended to think that the words he held in his hands were “prayer” by definition. The siddur advertised itself as “the order of prayer” (this is what the title *siddur tefilla* actually means), so most Jews came to the simple conclusion that all there really was to prayer (or their obligation to pray) was fully satisfied by reciting the printed words. If I may borrow Heinemann’s tongue-in-cheek use of a famous rabbinic saying, the availability of printed siddurim in effect told the average Jew: *Ka-zeh re’eh ve-kaddesh!* [“See this and sanctify it!”]. People have a tendency to ascribe essential holiness to concrete religious objects; in this case, they ascribed holiness to a text.

Over time, a general attitude developed that free prayer without fixed words wasn’t “real” prayer, especially if it wasn’t in Hebrew. It might be a necessary substitute for ignorant men or for women (after all, the *tehinot* were usually aimed at women), but someone able to pray the “real” way needed nothing beyond the blessings established by Hazal and the other prayers from the siddur that were used in the synagogue. This became the dominant attitude despite the fact that Hazal had valued informal *tahanunim* very highly, and despite even Rambam’s insistence that the fixed prayers were only instituted because people had lost the ability to pray in their own words in Hebrew.

## THE REACTION TO REFORM

More recently, the Orthodox reaction to Reform in the nineteenth century also caused religious Jews to magnify the sanctity of the text in the siddur. The threat of Reform tampering with the siddur (such tampering was for ideological reasons, of course, and not because reformers placed any value on informal prayer) led great rabbis such as *Hatam Sofer* to condemn any deviations, to the extent that to omit even one *piyyut* was forbidden.<sup>8</sup> Though such stringencies are hard to justify halakhically, nineteenth century *rabbanim* saw them as *hora’at sha’ah*, special edicts that were desperately needed in order to prevent the abandonment of the Torah

8. On the Orthodox reaction to Reform innovations in the liturgy, see Elbogen, pp. 299–301. Elbogen correctly noted that most of these objections had no basis in the halakhic sources. Also see Jakob J. Petuchowshi, *Prayerbook Reform in Europe* (New York: The World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1968), pp. 88–104 (“The Battle of the Proof Texts”).

However, the nineteenth-century Orthodox rabbis saw the battle against Reform as a *hora’at sha’ah* against a movement to abandon the halakha, and thus not all of their conclusions needed to be based on halakhic criterion.

encouraged by reformers. Since Reform challenged the sanctity and truth of traditional Jewish beliefs and practices, the rabbinic leaders found it necessary to counter them by stressing the implicit value of every custom, no matter how minor it might seem.

What was appropriate and necessary in the nineteenth century, however, may be detrimental today. We have to make sure that we do not continue to fight yesterday's battles long after they are over. Today, Orthodox communities are thriving and growing, and they are not influenced in the slightest way by the rituals practiced in Reform synagogues. But even as observant Jewish communities flourish, they are continually plagued by the problem of *keva* in *tefilla*, an intractable religious problem that demands bold responses. Let us not bind ourselves to an absolutely rigid manner of *tefilla* in a conditioned response to Reform heresies of a century ago; those heresies no longer threaten us. But for those of us who need speaking to Hashem in our own words to be a major aspect of our *tefillot* as part of an attempt to pray with *kavvana*, continuing to fight the battle against Reform comes at the expense of our own *avodat Hashem*.

### KABBALA

At one point, Heinemann briefly mentions that kabbalistic notions may have contributed to solidifying the text of the siddur.<sup>9</sup> But as we saw in chapters five and eight, their influence was not minor but a definite, powerful factor. Mystics not only fixed various details in the siddur,<sup>10</sup> but also provided a theological basis for the belief that ideal prayer specifically means reciting predetermined words. As we saw in chapters five and eight, kabbalistic systems (especially those from after the time of Rabbi Isaac Luria and based on his teachings) posited that each and every word has a specific effect on processes within higher spiritual universes, and that such effects were dependent on reciting them all exactly and in their proper order.<sup>11</sup> No more powerful and uncompromising reason to demand the exact recitation of specific texts for prayer could possibly be offered.

### IMPLICATIONS OF THE FIXED PRAYER-BOOK FOR MEANINGFUL PRAYER

Because of the reasons we have discussed, the siddur with its fixed texts for prayer eventually became the primary vehicle for *tefilla* among Jews.

9. "Keva' ve-hiddush ba-Tefilla ha-Yehudit" in Cohn, p. 83.

10. For example, see Daniel Sperber's discussion of "numerology" as a factor deciding the exact text to be recited for Kiddush on Friday evenings, in *Minhagei Yisrael: Mekorot ve-Toladot*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kuk, 1991), pp. 157–167. Sperber added more material in vol. 4 (1995), p. 291.

11. See Rabbi Nossan Scherman's comment quoted in chapter eight, and see note 40 there.

Though it cannot be proven, I am intuitively drawn to the view held by Rambam (and by Heinemann in our own century) that for more than any other reason it was the desire to pray in Hebrew—a language most adult male Jews could at least read and understand throughout our long exile, even though they usually could not express themselves freely in it—that eventually led all Jews to adopt printed siddurim for their prayers.

Other influences that we mentioned, such as the continued effort by *posekim* to standardize and codify the details of religious practices, the ease with which Jews began to rely on written or printed materials in order to correctly fulfil their obligation to pray, the attempt to counteract Reform breaches of halakha by declaring that every word in the siddur was inviolable, and the ascendancy of kabbalistic views on prayer—all of these reasons reinforced the perception that prayer is essentially a matter of reciting specific words.

In the first two chapters of this book we saw that while Hazal and later authorities fully acknowledged the *reality* of prayer-without-*kavvana* among most Jews, they still completely denied its *validity* as prayer. To take this point one step further now and relate it to our present topic, it is crucial to note another important claim that has been made frequently and with great justification. The claim is that fixed obligatory structures for prayer tend to reinforce habits of rote recitation and to make *kavvana* even harder to achieve than it otherwise would be. Our own study seems to back this claim up as well. In chapter two we saw that Hazal—in whose time texts were still fluid and for whom personal “free” prayer was still a common and accepted practice—candidly acknowledged problems with the lack of *kavvana*. But they still demanded *kavvana* for at least some of the blessings, and in addition they unequivocally forbade prayer whenever *kavvana* was not possible. On the other hand, authoritatively-worded prayer texts became widespread during the period of the geonim (after the Talmud), and it was during this period that the claim that “nowadays we no longer have *kavvana*” first began to be used for justifying prayer even without it. It would be unreasonable to claim that fixed prayer texts and the loss of freely-worded blessings are the *entire* reason that the demand for *kavvana* had to be dropped, but the fact that both things began to happen during the same era cannot entirely be a coincidence, either. I strongly suspect that the former influenced the latter.

In chapters eight and nine we emphasized the fact that although Hazal fixed a general halakhic format for prayer, most medieval halakhic authorities agreed that it was a much looser format than observant Jews today usually imagine, and that Hazal continued to emphasize the importance of personal expression (*hiddush*) even within the format of obligatory blessings and much more so outside of them. However, the opposite is equally true: as much as Hazal stressed *hiddush*, they still fixed the times and structure of prayer, introducing numerous specific obligations regarding them. Now in chapter four I tried to show that this was due to the great emphasis they placed on *tefilla be-tzibbur*: one cannot have a “praying congregation” beseech God unless each congregant is somehow united with the others in the time and place of his prayer, and in the content of what he says to God.

That is why Hazal ordained community prayer at specific times in the synagogue, and also mandated a common outline for the prayers themselves (though they did not go so far as to freeze the actual words into one unchangeable text for all). But a fundamental problem still remains: How can their demand for fixed times and formats be reconciled with the sincerity (i.e., *kavvana*) they called for in every single prayer? On the contrary, such sincerity is usually found only when *tefilla* is a free outpouring of the heart!

Before answering this, it must be granted that *kavvana* is indeed much harder for prescribed prayers. This is somewhat less true for obligatory prayers that leave room for personal expression, such as Hazal instituted, but even for them it was a serious problem. However, there is a way of making even fixed, unchanging prayers a meaningful part of one's life.

For years I have felt a debt of gratitude to Rabbi Avrohom Davis, who created a tool to help make the fixed prayers in the siddur more meaningful for English-speaking Jews. His *Metsudah Siddur* provides a clear translation, line by line, for each individual *phrase* of the siddur; in the years before I learned to speak Hebrew fluently, I found that praying from his siddur was virtually the only way for me to say the *tefillot* in Hebrew and to honestly mean what I said. In the introduction to his siddur, Rabbi Davis movingly described the potential for spirituality that is inherent in *fixed* prayer texts, and hinted at how to overcome *keva* while reciting them:

To a large extent, man's spiritual growth is measured by his development in understanding prayer and the extent of his personal devotion. In his lifetime man is in a constant state of change. No two days of his life are similar nor even two hours. While the world is unchangeable, man's view of the world changes from moment to moment. This might be compared to someone looking out of the window of a moving train. He notices a mountain in the distance and as the train speeds along he continues observing it until it is out of sight. While it is true that he constantly sees the same mountain, his *view* of the mountain changes from one moment to the next, each moment bringing a fresh, new perspective of the scene before him. Only if he slept through it or was otherwise occupied could he have failed to witness the ever changing reality of the mountain.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the world of prayer. The language of *tefilla* is constant and unchanging, but for one who is intellectually alert and emotionally alive, no two prayers are the same. For him today's Mincha was different from yesterday's, and tomorrow's Mincha will be a new spiritual experience. [Remember Rashi on *le-haddesh bo davar!*—S.K.] To those who are totally alive during every moment of prayer, each moment brings a fresh perspective and insight to *tefilla*. One who prays with sensitivity and intellectual concentration, feels himself propelled and elevated by each *tefilla*. The spiritual thrust of each *tefilla* propels him upward so that his perspective of the prayers is always new; and while the words are the same, his



understanding of them and his concept of Divine worship is constantly enriched.<sup>12</sup>

The point underlying Rabbi Davis's description is that with fixed prayer texts, the job of the pray-er is to *lose himself in the meaning of the words, and to make their meaning his own*. It is only by doing so that he can discover new nuances of meaning in them during each and every prayer. This is the way to avoid *keva*. But course, having *kavvana* during such a process is still much harder than talking freely to God, more difficult than expressing thoughts and feelings that come naturally.

Friedrich Heiler, in his classic survey of prayer in world religions, described the possible value and meaning inherent in prescribed prayer texts in a similar way:

In spite of all tendency to de-spiritualization, prescribed or meritorious prayer has a religious value. There are always devout persons who, animated by a personal or religious impulse, give themselves up to the meaning of the prescribed prayers, and pray with thought and concentration; they penetrate through the words to the spirit in which the prayer was composed. And so even legal formularies of prayer can kindle, strengthen, and purify the religious life.<sup>13</sup>

Heiler pessimistically assumes that only unusually "devout persons" find spiritual meaning in the way Rabbi Davis described. They are the exception rather than the rule. Davis, on the other hand, actively created a tool to make success easier for the average person, probably because as a rabbi he knows that the halakhic demand for *kavvana* is incumbent on all Jews, not just the especially "devout." Actually, the truth is probably somewhere between Heiler's and Davis's estimates: On the one hand, despite Davis's optimistic picture, *kavvana* ("a new spiritual experience") for the same prayer texts throughout one's life can only be realistic for rare individuals. Almost all people will lapse into *keva* often, or even most of the time. But on the other hand, the Jewish demand for *kavvana* helps make us realize that even average people (not just exceptionally "devout" ones), can often reach a significant level of spiritual awareness in their prayers if they are given some help and guidance, as Davis proposes. All people have the potential to frequently achieve *kavvana* for the fixed prayers (Davis), but only rare ones can achieve it most or all of the time (Heiler).

Heiler, however, continues with another important realization about fixed prayer and what it can mean for functionally religious people, even if their level of spirituality is not high when they pray:

And even prayers recited without complete understanding are not entirely without some religious quality. Even the mechanical pray-er is

12. Avrohom Davis, *The Metsudah Siddur: Sabbath/Festival Prayers* (New York: Metsudah, 1984), pp. viii–ix.

13. Heiler, p. 351.

conscious, though indistinctly and vaguely, that he has to do with something holy; that the words which he uses bear a religious value, that they bring him into relation to God, and confirm and advance his soul's salvation. All these thoughts are mingled in a weak and dim devotional experience and yet it is a genuinely religious experience. The same mood of reverent and joyous confidence which animated primitive man when he whispered mysterious incantations, possesses also the Mohammedan zealot who performs his *salat* with meticulous care, or the Torah-loving Jew, who with hand swathed with phylacteries, recites his *shema*, or the pious Catholic who says his rosary, allowing bead after bead to slip through his fingers, and stringing together *ave* to *ave*.<sup>14</sup>

Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald, a well-known figure in adult Jewish education in the United States, recently distributed a beautiful introduction to Jewish prayer on audiocassette, and made essentially the same point during a vivid and honest description of the near impossibility most Jews find in achieving *kavvana* on a daily basis. He was candid about the often dismal reality of rote recitation, and at one point he mentioned the spiritual value that daily prayer can have even *without* any *kavvana* at all (remember that this "chatty" quotation is from an informal oral lecture!):

I want to tell you one thing that might surprise you, but I believe it very deeply in my heart: Prayer is not only saying the words, and not only having intent in your heart, and not only having awareness in your mind. Prayer is something that is activated on *many* levels. When I'm tired and I can barely open my eyelids in the morning, but I say, "God, You put out for me, [so] I'm going to put out for You, and I'm going to *schlepp* my body to the synagogue, and I'm going to sit in that synagogue chair like a zombie [even though] I'm not even going to be able to recite a single word. (Let alone *with* intent, I can't even pray *without* intent!)" —I've [still] prayed, because I've *shlepped* my body out of bed and I've walked the four or five blocks to the synagogue. *I've made an attempt. Walking to the synagogue is a prayer.*

. . . [Even] coming to the synagogue and talking about the stock market is also a prayer. Not that you should do it, and I don't think it is the right thing to do, but you came to the *synagogue* to talk about the stock market! You could have gone to the marketplace, you could have gone to a bar, but you chose to come to a Jewish place of gathering. That's also a prayer!

I wouldn't say it's a very high level of prayer. [If] you want to talk about the baseball game—that's not a high level of prayer, but you came to a *shul* [synagogue] to do it! *You did it in a synagogue and that's a profound gesture. It is a [significant] action, and we should not*

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14. Heiler, *ibid.*

condemn it, although we should try to educate these people to pray in a more profound way. Certainly we should. But it's a prayer.<sup>15</sup>

Both Heiler and Buchwald make it absolutely clear that reciting texts with little or no awareness of their meaning has at least some religious value. Neither advocates such recitation, of course, but both make it clear that it should not be utterly condemned, either. In particular, Rabbi Buchwald bases his justification on the fact that performing a mitzva daily shows continual dedication to God. Also, it shows identification with the needs of the community to come to the synagogue, and that is one of the main purposes of obligatory Jewish prayer, as we saw in chapter four. It is unquestionable that even rote recitation, or just the act of coming to the synagogue on a regular basis (even without actually praying!) has a serious value that ought not to be scorned.

However, I respectfully question the assertion by both men that such recitation should truly be called "prayer." This obviously depends on how we define "prayer," and with a loose definition their inclusion of completely rote recitation makes complete sense. But if we define prayer as speaking directly to God, as we did in chapter three, then such senseless mumbling cannot be *tefilla*. Again, this does *not* mean that it is entirely devoid of religious value. It may even be a meritorious religious act. But it is not *tefilla*.

Instead, we should take Rambam's clear words to heart: "Any *tefilla* without *kavvana* is not a *tefilla*." He meant this categorically: prayer-without-*kavvana* is not just a *lesser* kind of prayer; rather, it is not considered prayer at all. One does not in any way fulfil his obligation with such a "prayer." In fact, it is *forbidden* to recite a prayer without any *kavvana* according to Rambam (and, in principle, according to all halakhic authorities), as we learned in chapter two. Despite this, prayer-without-*kavvana* still became mandatory in practice; but this was only so that the prayers would continue to be recited in the hope that, at least sometimes, people who normally prayed with the dim level of religious awareness described so realistically by Heiler and Rabbi Buchwald would infuse the fixed prayers with the deeper kind of meaning described by Rabbi Davis. But if this possibility did not exist, then the halakha would *not* mandate regular, obligatory prayer. Despite whatever value there may be in a prayer-without-*kavvana* (and I agree that it *does* have some value), such "prayer" would be forbidden even today if it never served as the basis for a higher level of prayer that deeply involves a person's heart, mind, and soul. This is because the rote recitation of words addressed to God is inappropriate and disrespectful towards Him; such recitation is a negative act in religious terms, not just a "lesser" kind of prayer.

This brings us to the crux of the matter about the fixed text we find in the

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15. Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald, "Prayer," audiocassette no. 2 from his *Crash Course in Basic Judaism* (see chapter three, note 9, above). I have had to modify his words slightly to help them better suit the printed page, and the emphasis is also mine.

siddur today. Despite those who emphasize that even the rote recitation of obligatory prayer texts still has some religious value (and I completely agree with them that it does), there is no justification for training people to rigidly adhere to those texts and always recite them all *beyond* halakhic requirements, leaving no room for personal expression even when it is allowed. Fixed texts encourage *keva* instead of *kavvana*; they are not a part of ideal prayer, but only a practical concession. Hazal mandated fixed formats and times for prayer, but they only did so *despite* the fact that this makes *kavvana* extremely difficult. They left room open for personal expression, too, in order to help overcome the bias towards *keva* which is inherent in all such prayers. Instead of relying solely on the words of the siddur, we need to encourage *hiddush* as much as possible in order to overcome the trend towards rote recitation which is innate in our fixed prayers. Hazal knew that it was possible, despite the difficulties, to attain *kavvana*, and it is our job as Jews who are committed to observing God's Torah to make it a reality as often as we possibly can.

When we studied the various philosophies of prayer in Part II, we saw there was only one school of thought on prayer that made reciting specific words a mandatory part of any ideal prayer, and that was the kabbalistic view (especially after the time of Rabbi Isaac Luria). In most kabbalistic systems the words themselves have inherent powers, beyond any normal human emotions or intentions that may accompany them. This view, of course, leads to de-emphasizing talking to God in one's own words or using the ideas in the siddur as models of prayer that can be built upon by any individual in his own way. Many Jews today (especially hasidim) still find great meaning when they approach *tefilla* from viewpoints with roots in the kabbala. What I have written here is not meant for them. For other observant Jews, however, the kabbala's rigid approach to the text of the siddur contributes to a terrible loss of meaning in prayer. What I have tried to show in our lengthy discussion of "Prayer as a Fixed Text" is that an alternative approach to the siddur, one that views the fixed tefillot as open to personal expression, also has strong and valid roots in the halakha and in Jewish thought. In fact, this approach seems closer to Hazal's ideal for *tefilla* than does the kabbalistic model. As we saw in chapter one, *keva* (rigidity) is anathema to prayer according to Hazal. Indeed, they encouraged each person to literally "say something new" each time he prays. Therefore, an alternative approach which is more encouraging towards personal expression deserves serious consideration.

Although all the philosophies of prayer we discussed in Part II are completely valid ones, they cannot always be reconciled. Trying to combine them all can only lead to a very shallow kind of prayer that will be forever plagued by its own inner contradictions. Rather, it must be candidly admitted that from the perspectives that define "*kavvana*" as simple sincerity or self-training, the kabbala's rigid approach to the text of the siddur can be highly detrimental. Therefore, people whose outlook on prayer is *not* a kabbalistic one should be encouraged to express the ideas of *tefilla* in their own words as much as they can within halakhic limits.

In short, the more rigid the structure of our fixed tefillot becomes, the

more difficult it becomes to avoid *keva* and to achieve *kavvana*. Especially when the words become completely frozen and *hiddush* disappears entirely (which is beyond the requirements of the halakha), *kavvana* becomes nearly impossible for many people. It is therefore crucial to encourage flexibility with the words (within permissible bounds, of course) for the sake of *kavvana*. Although the texts of the siddur have already been fixed, they should be used as models and as the basis for further expression in our personal conversations with God. The siddur must not become a dead end for the words of our prayers.

## CONCLUSION

Undoubtably, all of the factors that led to the "hardening" of prayer texts still continue to operate today. However, it is crucial for us to realize that the inability of common people to express themselves in Hebrew, which Rambam (and later Heinemann) considered to be the primary reason for fixed words, has changed dramatically since the creation of the State of Israel. Now that children in the world's most vibrant Jewish communities grow up speaking Hebrew as their mother tongue, perhaps it is time to begin to revive the tradition of personal prayer in Israel. Just as prayer texts remained flexible in Eretz Yisrael the longest, let informal prayer be revived there first!

Some will object that Israel has already existed for half a century, and if one includes the era before statehood then up to five generations have spoken Hebrew, but there are still no signs of either a revival for free and informal prayer, or for greater *hiddush* in the structured prayers. This, however, is because religious Israelis are taught to think that *tefilla* means reading the specific text of the siddur and nothing else, just as most Jews have assumed for centuries. For the revival of Hebrew to have an impact on how we pray, there must also be education towards a freer concept of *tefilla*, one that re-emphasizes Hazal's view of prayer as a true conversation with God.

It is rethinking and re-education for individuals that are called for here. Regardless of how most Israelis and most Jews pray, any one Jew can still infuse his *tefilla* with deeper meaning and with greater *hiddush* if he is shown that it is a valid approach and given guidance about how to do it. I do not advocate any revolution in how *tefilla* is conducted in synagogues. What I do favor is encouraging *individuals* to rethink how and why they pray and, perhaps, to change the way they pray in accordance with their conclusions. This will be the topic of the next chapter.



## ❖❖❖ IV ❖❖❖

# *Practical Suggestions for Kavvana*





## *Making Prayer a True Conversation with God*

### PRAYER AS CONVERSATION

Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twersky, the author of several popular books on psychology and *hasidut*, related the following anecdote:

A man was being escorted to the *kotel*, obviously a blind man, guided by others on either side. He was a Sephardic Jew, his sharp, graceful features accentuated by thin, curly earlocks. He approached the *kotel*, and leaned forward to give it an affectionate kiss. He ran his hands over its surface, his super-sensitive fingers feeling centuries of history, glory, and suffering in every crevice and ripple. Then he began his dialogue with God. Yes, a dialogue, for although only one voice was audible, he knew that he had a responsive listener.

He spoke directly, respectfully and with great clarity, exactly as if the conversation were with a person. He gestured with his hands to provide the necessary emphasis and description that his words required. At one point, he abruptly stopped, hesitated a moment and said, "Oh, I'm sorry. I already told You that yesterday."

This was simple and sincere prayer at its best. There was no doubt in this man's mind that what he had told God yesterday was heard, and that there was therefore no reason to repeat it.

I turned back to continue reciting the Psalms, realizing that I had never really prayed before.<sup>1</sup>

During *tefilla*, how many of us really feel that we talk to God? Sometimes the idea is easier for a child to grasp than for an adult, precisely because adults have so thoroughly absorbed the formal structure of our *tefillot*. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz described how an incident with his daughter made this clear to him:

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1. *Generation to Generation* (Lakewood, New Jersey: C.I.S., 1992), pp. 133-134.

One day my younger daughter wanted to talk to me in the middle of *tefilla*, and she was very upset with me for not responding to her. Finally I answered her (as I think I should have): "I was busy, I was talking to Hashem." But then she responded (with very deep insight) and asked me why she didn't see Hashem answer me! This second question is quite deep, and beyond the scope of our discussion here. In any case, a four or five year old girl was ready to accept the idea that I was talking to Hashem. But she wanted it to be a true conversation, not just a speech!<sup>2</sup>

Rabbi Steinzaltz's point in the article was that without an obvious belief that God listens to us and responds to our prayers (making prayer "a true conversation"), prayer has no point. His daughter understood this intuitively and verbalized it. For Rabbi Steinzaltz, as we mentioned in chapter six, *studying* the tefillot (such as examining how words and phrases relate, learning the backgrounds of the prayers in the Bible and in halakhic literature, or studying commentaries to the siddur) is not what *kavvana* is all about. Nor are the textual and historical issues that scholars debate (such as dates of composition, mistakes in the transmission of the text, anachronisms, etc.) any part of *kavvana*. *Kavvana* for prayer is not a form of *talmud Torah* (Torah study), nor is it any sort of "textual analysis." All of these things can add important meaning to our prayers, but they are just minor side issues when it comes to the essential *activity* of prayer. They are not *kavvana*. Rather, *kavvana* begins and ends with the basic realization that the words I am saying are addressed to God Himself ("Barukh Attah . . ."), that I really mean what I say to Him, and that He listens and responds. Prayer is nothing if it is not communication, a real conversation with the very Creator of the world, who is involved in the daily lives of men and listens to their words when they call to Him in truth, with sincerity. Prayer means one can honestly say, "I was busy, I was talking to Hashem" to his child.<sup>3</sup>

### A WORKING DEFINITION OF "KAVVANA"

What I wrote just above in the spirit of Rabbi Steinzaltz's essay is a forthright and strongly worded statement about what *kavvana* is, and what it is not. But as we saw in Part II of this book, the task of defining *kavvana* is intricate and profound, not simple. We examined the activity of prayer from a wide variety of perspectives. We considered what each one viewed as the purpose of prayer, and what it thought *kavvana* ought to be like ideally. We even encountered ideas of prayer from the rational school which are curiously similar to the definitions of *kavvana* that Rabbi Steinzaltz bluntly rejected! One obvious conclusion from Part II is that there is not and cannot ever be a single "true" definition of ideal *kavvana*. Each

2. "Hinnukh le-Tefilla [Education for Prayer]" in Cohn, p. 211.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 209–210.

*hashkafa* (philosophy of Judaism) has its own vision of what a "perfect" prayer should be like and in turn defines *kavvana* along its own lines. Each perspective, and its accompanying model of prayer, is legitimate and must be accorded respect. All of them are "the words of the Living God."

However, not every model is right for everyone, and this is why Rabbi Steinzaltz's seemingly narrow definition of *kavvana* is, nevertheless, entirely appropriate. In principle it is certainly a mistake to pick and choose among the philosophies of prayer, labeling some correct and others wrong; it is also an indication of shallow thinking. But it is still necessary for every person to adopt practical, *working* definitions for prayer and *kavvana*, ones that will serve as effective personal guides for prayer every day. I have no doubt that Rabbi Steinzaltz himself is fully aware of the "rational" philosophies of prayer, and knows that in some of them prayer becomes far removed from the idea of a simple "conversation" with God. But he still suggested the "conversational" model to be the "true" one precisely because, for most Jews, only this model can reflect their religious reality: prayer doesn't make sense to us or move us unless we really believe we can talk to God in basically the same way that human beings communicate with each other, i.e., by using words the same way we do in interpersonal contexts. It is precisely this reality that led Rabbi Steinzaltz to validate one particular definition for *kavvana*, though for the sake of accuracy I prefer to call it a *working* definition.

Every thoughtful definition of *kavvana* derives from a coherent *hashkafa* (a worldview, or a specific philosophy of Judaism). *Hashkafa* is a highly subjective matter, closely connected to individual personalities. Both the medieval rationalists and mystics were captured by a desire to understand God's Torah in ways deeper and more profound than the ordinary terms of day-to-day human life. Both groups correctly realized that the "simple" or "naive" model of the human relationship with God based on the social analogy cannot be "objectively" true or accurate, so both rejected it and instead chose to follow other paths in their quests for deeper understanding. The particular *direction* each quest followed, however, was to great extent determined by personal tendencies: rationalists tried to achieve deeper understanding of God through intellectual queries, operating within medieval systems of metaphysics, while mystics placed more value on Divine "universes" of which knowledge could only be gained through subliminal intuition and flashes of insight gained through meditation. Rationalists asked hard questions and supplied answers, while mystics, seeing the entire issue of man's relationship to God as transcending conscious human categories, created new systems not dependent on such categories and understood the activity of prayer through them. And within both camps, among both rationalists and mystics, an entire spectrum of approaches was possible.

Again, the choice is a highly personal one. Some people are instinctively drawn to a mystical view of the world, which sees every aspect of life as a reflection of doings in realms that are not apparent or understood in "simplicistic" terms, nor in the fashion of sober-minded equations. Such people find sublime and intense meanings in every aspect of life, including

mitzvot like prayer; these meanings cannot be understood in "normal" human categories, but are best examined through poetry and meditation. They sense that the "deeper" meanings inherent in our world, our lives, and our actions may be more available to the subconscious than to the self-aware psyche.

Many others, however, are drawn strongly to concrete explanations, especially for understanding God's mitzvot and for prayer in particular. This does not mean that they view the world in rigid categories, or that they cannot appreciate levels of meaning with subtle differences and complementary explanations for the mitzvot. What it does mean is that (on the one hand) they find little to satisfy them in vague mystical expressions that seem to have no "hold" in real experience, or (on the other hand) in commonly-held beliefs that cannot stand up to basic questioning and criticism. In the case of prayer, the general approach such people take is clear: They find that they must reject the simple view of prayer because of the obvious paradoxes it involves, but at the same time they find no solace in the idea that prayer is meant to affect certain processes in the hierarchy of the *sefirot* because the terms of that system are entirely foreign to them. Instead, they turn to the neat and elegant idea that prayer's true purpose is not to evoke a direct answer from God, but instead to affect the person who prays by instilling religious attitudes and ideas. Thus, the paradoxes are easily resolved in a way that sets the mind at ease.

But there is a third option. The term best describing it is the well-known phrase *emunah peshuta*, which may be translated as "simple faith." Now, "simple faith" is often dismissed as the worldview of religious people whose way of thinking is overly simplistic, credulous, or naive. But "simple" need not mean "shallow." In the case of prayer, even a "simple" person can appreciate the major paradoxes and difficulties involved, as we saw in chapter four. (The questions themselves, we saw, were invariably more down-to-earth than the various solutions proposed for them!) I submit that in facing the intellectual problems raised by prayer, which should be serious existential issues for any person who prays every day, it is not at all shallow or simplistic to arrive at the following conclusion: "I believe that God's true essence is entirely beyond my understanding. Yet I also know that He desires a personal relationship with me, which includes my talking to Him. I know this because He revealed it in the Torah. It is true that when these two beliefs are juxtaposed they create a paradox, but because of my very nature as a human being with finite limitations I am unable to resolve the paradox to my satisfaction; thus, I can never fully comprehend my relationship with God. But it is reasonable to assume that, since God desires a relationship with me, He allows that relationship to be conducted in human terms, in terms that I can understand and make use of. This is why He allows me to talk to Him after the fashion that I would to a human king, master, or father. In no way does this mean that my philosophical qualms about prayer are resolved, nor does it mean that I may disregard the fact that God's true nature is nothing like that of any human being, in theory. But it does provide me with a legitimate model for praying to Him in practice." In this statement a "simple" yet mature faith in God (*emuna*

*pehshuta*) translates naturally into a “simple” yet mature approach to prayer (*tefilla kifshutah*). This approach in turn defines *kavvana* simply as “sincerity,” after the social analogy of talking to another human being. Following Rabbi Steinzaltz, the “simple” model will be our “working model” of prayer in this chapter, and “sincerity” will be our “working definition” of *kavvana*.

A great many models for prayer and definitions of *kavvana* are legitimate in principle, of course, but in the practice of prayer there are very strong reasons to emphasize the “simple” model of the relationship between God and man above the rational and kabbalistic models. First and foremost, there is the text of the siddur. Only the “simple” model, with its assumption that I really speak to God as I would to a human being and He hears me, can do justice to the meaning of the words that I say. As we saw in chapters five and eight, the kabbalistic and hasidic approaches tend to avoid the literal meaning of the siddur; there is a conscious rejection of the idea that I speak to (and especially petition) God. Even the rational approach causes dissonance between the pray-er and the prayer that he says: after all, if the true meaning of prayer is to influence or educate the pray-er, then does he really expect God to listen to him in any “human” sense, as the words themselves indicate? As we saw from the writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, when the “educational” or rationalistic view of prayer is taken to its extreme logical conclusion, the “You” in our prayers ultimately shifts from God to the pray-er himself. If I may be excused for oversimplifying, rational prayer becomes talking to yourself instead of a real conversation with God. Only the “simple” model of prayer avoids this kind of dissonance between the pray-er and the words that he actually says to God. It may not resolve the intellectual paradoxes, but it is the only approach that helps deal with the practical emotional issue of how I should feel when I to talk to God in prayer, and what I should mean by the words that I say.

Secondly, the simple fact is that most Jews who prayed always understood prayer this way, and will always continue to do so. No one denies this. Neither the rational nor the mystical models of prayer ever did or could light up the hearts of Jews and replace the simple idea of praising God, thanking God, and petitioning God in the “simplest” fashion. The basic sincerity of such prayers, whether it is expressed in joy or tears, can never be matched by the feelings produced in a rational philosophic prayer or a kabbalistic *kavvana*. *Kavvana* defined as “sincerity” is not only the most popular kind, but also the most effective kind.

Thirdly, for Jews who study the Bible and the Talmud, it is the “simple” model that renders the actual content of rabbinic prayer and its halakhot, which they encounter in their studies, most understandable. I hope that the previous chapters of this book itself are sufficient illustration of this point.

In certain ways the “simple” model I am advocating is related to both of the previous models, rational and mystical. In common with rationalists, even “simple” prayer can agree with the rational idea that Hazal may have had an “educational” agenda for the fixed prayers they instituted, but as a secondary goal. In other words, certain ideas were included in order to

reinforce them among Jews in addition to telling them to God in the hope that He may be influenced by them.

Also, even a person who takes the "simple" approach to prayer can understand central paradoxes of prayer from a logical, rational perspective and may consider all of the ingenious solutions that the human mind can offer. But the major difference between "simple" and rationalistic prayer is in admitting the inadequacy of attempts to resolve the philosophical paradoxes in human terms, in realizing that a "rational" explanation of prayer will sacrifice the intense experience of "simple" prayer while still not bettering our understanding of the man-God relationship in any profound way; that relationship, because of its very nature, must forever remain beyond our understanding. In other words, "simple" prayer candidly admits its problems, but denies that rationalistic prayer provides a compelling alternative. Therefore, "simple" prayer makes a conscious decision to rely on the social analogy despite its paradoxes, because it knows that a deeper understanding of how we relate to God is fundamentally impossible. "Simple" prayer is not naive prayer.

In common with mystics, "simple" prayer shares the realization that our relationship with God should *not* be understood in normal human categories, nor through logic. But the crucial difference lies in "simple" prayer's not attempting to add the structure of mystical systems to our understanding of that relationship either. There is no reason to assume that such systems add to our understanding of this topic (which by its very nature must always remain beyond us) any more truthfully than rational systems. Kabbalistic systems, unlike medieval metaphysical systems, rely on the results of meditation and intuition in addition to purely logical categories. But ultimately, like the "rational" systems, they are still the products of human beings, with finite limitations.

Additionally, "simple" prayer must differ from kabbalistic prayer in its approach to prayer as a fixed text. There is no way to reconcile the two on this practical point. The kabbala assumes that there is an intrinsic value to each word, and that the way to make prayer a unique experience each time lies in the *kavvanot*. *Kavvana* for "simple" prayer, however, is sincerely meaning the words we say to God according to what they mean in normal human contexts, and this cannot be accomplished time and again by saying exactly the same words. The text instead becomes stale and will be muttered insincerely. Therefore "simple" prayer finds a positive religious value in utilizing the halakhic flexibility for prayer texts, which we discussed in chapter eight, by adding actual *hiddush* to the words, thereby ensuring that there will be a place in the blessings for people to sincerely tell God what is newly on their minds each time they pray again. This option for textual *hiddush*, however, is thoroughly rejected in the kabbalistic model of prayer, as we also saw in chapter eight.

Nor can "simple" prayer be reconciled with an extremely quietistic mystical view, namely that prayer is only for the needs of the *sefirot* and not at all for human concerns. But "simple" and kabbalistic prayer can be complementary instead of contradictory if an extreme quietistic view is *not*

taken. The idea that God suffers along with our suffering adds beautiful depth, even to simple prayer, if it means that prayer is for God's suffering (i.e., the disharmony among the *sefirot*) along with our true and legitimate human needs.

The question is not which definition of prayer or *kavvana* is "right," but which works the best for each Jew who prays. I personally find difficulties in the rationalistic and mystical models of prayer, but this in no way invalidates them. In this chapter we will emphasize the "simple" model of prayer, one that may prove valuable to a great many people, and we will try to help them use it effectively. Strangely enough, I have found that though this model has always been the *most* popular among people who pray (for obvious reasons), it is usually the one *least* stressed by those who set out to improve the sense of prayer and *kavvana* among Jews. Furthermore, though most Jews have always understood prayer in this way, they haven't really been able to employ the "simple" model of prayer as a true conversation with God in practice. As we shall see throughout this chapter, so many practical aspects of how Jews actually pray in the synagogue mitigate *against* simply talking to God with sincerity! My hunch is that the reason so many people have problems with *kavvana* is *not* because of intellectual inadequacies in the "simple" understanding of prayer as a conversation with God, but because people have so much trouble actually praying in this way under the realistic constraints of daily prayer. The problem is not with the *model*, but with the practical difficulties of its *application*.

The rest of this chapter will discuss how it is possible to really talk to God in the simple sense during a regular *Shaharit*, *Minha*, or *Ma'ariv*, whether together with a minyan or alone. We will frequently refer to points from previous chapters when they can guide us in praying the "simple" way, or provide needed justification for this kind of prayer. We will discuss numerous practical daily problems, and also some historical controversies where this "simple" type of prayer was difficult to implement or in conflict with the structure of Jewish prayer as it actually developed. Even the historical problems we will bring up (which include the fates of *pesukei de-zimra*, *hazarat ha-shatz*, *hazzanut*, and *piyyut*) all have important practical aspects that continue to be highly relevant on a daily basis. In fact, the debate over some of them goes on today, with all sides employing the same arguments as in previous centuries. But the main focus of the entire chapter will be on practical ways to bring *kavvana* into "simple" prayer, according to our working definition of *kavvana* as sincerity.

## REINTRODUCE INDIVIDUAL EXPRESSION

What Rabbi Steinzaltz didn't mention in the anecdote we quoted above (justifiably, because it wasn't the point of his article) is that his description of prayer as a "conversation" with God (along with the simple definition of *kavvana* as "sincerity"), has many practical implications for how we should

say our tefillot. It is obvious, first of all, that there can be no true conversation without the type of individual expression that Hazal encouraged in prayer. Conversation is not a canned speech. Furthermore, conversation with a king or a master or a father (and God is all of these) implies that one speaks in a way that indicates respect, deference, and even awe. In such a conversation a person pays careful attention to what he says. When he says something, he says it like he means it.

Years ago, I heard the former head of the Israeli youth organization, Bnei Akiva, lead *Birkat ha-Mazon*. Towards the end, he made a special point of saying, out loud, "*Ha-Rahaman Hu yevarekh et Medinat Yisrael, reshit tzemihat ge'ulatenu!* [May the Merciful One bless the State of Israel, the beginning of our redemption!]" He said it like he meant it (and he did), but at the time I thought adding a special *harahaman* on one's own was quite tacky.

Years later, a group of Lubavitcher *hasidim* made me change my mind. During their *Birkat ha-Mazon*, each of them cried the following out loud: "*Ha-Rahaman Hu yevarekh et Adonenu Morenu ve-Rabbenu!* [May the Merciful One bless our master and teacher, our rebbe!]" It was then that I realized that the whole idea of adding a new *harahaman* wasn't tacky at all. These *hasidim* really wanted, more than anything else in the world, for their rebbe's health to be restored. They said it like they meant it, and of course they did. And they believed without reservation that Hashem really listened to their plea and cared. In fact, this *harahaman* was a sincere *tefilla*, and if anything is "tacky" it is other tefillot that people mutter without any fervor. I then decided that if these *hasidim* sincerely added a *bakkasha* for the Rebbe of Lubavitch (may the memory of this righteous man be a blessing!), then I should plead with God on behalf of *Medinat Yisrael*. At times I also add other *harahamans* of my own devising.

Most religious Jews have a genuine antipathy to expressing their own feelings during the tefillot in their own words. (I used to share this aversion.) What we have to do, therefore, is teach ourselves and our communities to use the siddur differently. Not to "reform" its text in any way, but to learn to treat it as the *basis* for *tefilla*, rather than as the *content* of *tefilla*. The siddur is *not* prayer itself, but a tool to help us speak to God. It is not a canned speech, telling a person exactly what to say so that his confrontation with God needn't be a unique, personal venture! Viewing the siddur as a *basis* for prayer and as a practical *tool*, rather than as the *sole content* of prayer, has two major practical implications for *tefilla* today: It means that there are things we *should* be saying but generally do not, and it means we should *not* be saying many of the things that we do say. It means that we should add something from outside the text of the siddur when we sincerely mean it, but that we should skip reciting many things if we will not mean them when we say them.

If a person needs to express something to God, but doesn't find a place for it in the formal structure of our tefillot, then something is wrong not with him, but with his conception of Jewish prayer. On the contrary, saying your own *harahaman* rather than just pulling the regular ones out of the siddur is exactly what Hazal would have wanted after the obligatory



blessings of *Birkat ha-Mazon*. As we learned in chapter eight, the rabbis of the Talmud expected personal expression to be part of *tefilla*. Hazal expected people to say their own private *tahanunim* after the obligatory *tefilla*, and they set an example for this themselves. (All halakhic authorities held that this is even appropriate, with certain limitations, during the structured blessings as well.) And in chapter one we learned that one always “says something new” in an ideal prayer, so that it won’t be *keva*.

Today, observant Jews generally do not do any of this because we are basically taught not to. Children, adolescents, and young adults in yeshivot are all taught that *tefilla* is “saying the words” in the siddur from beginning to end, without pausing, without adding anything, and especially without skipping anything.

Children must be taught that adding personal *bakkashot* (requests) during the *Amida* is not a relatively unimportant option they have “if they want to.” On the contrary, teach them that this is an essential part of *tefilla*, and that they should use their own words when they do it! (Using the various “insertions” that some siddurim provide to pray for people who are ill defeats the purpose.) Talking to God should become a fundamental religious reality for children. In school, for instance, don’t just ask children to compose stories and essays; have them write a letter to Hashem. And when a child reaches bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah, composing a *tefilla* is no less appropriate than drafting a *devar Torah*.

Teach adults that when they are faced with enormous troubles, *tahanun* is the proper time for them to plead to God for help in their own words. If there isn’t enough time during *tahanun*, or if they feel uncomfortable doing this, then they should know that prayer during troubled times isn’t limited to the synagogue.

High school students and adults should study the text of the siddur, and learn how certain attitudes are continually expressed. Important examples are: *ahavat Hashem* (love of God), *yirat Hashem* (awe of God), *bitahon ba-shem* (trust in God), gratitude to God, amazement at His glorious creations, empathy for the members of one’s community and Jews everywhere (the reason the prayers are in the plural), love for the Torah and its mitzvot, love for the Land of Israel and Jerusalem, yearning for *deveikut* (closeness to God), longing for complete redemption and true lasting peace for the Jewish people. But for each of these ideas, we must teach the tefillot that express them as *models* that each person can build on in his own words, rather than as a “dead end” for conversations with God. The ideal is for everyone to reformulate these attitudes in a personal way.

Of course, people must be taught when and how such personal approaches to God are halakhically appropriate. Conversation with God in the middle blessings of the *Amida* is only appropriate when it matches the theme of the blessing, and so it cannot be totally free. But since this is the only essential limitation,<sup>4</sup> and since personal additions may said be in any

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4. My statement that “this is the only essential limitation” on adding petitions was justified at great length at the end of chapter eight, “Technical Note on Adding

language,<sup>5</sup> the fixed prayers need not be devoid of verbal *hiddush*.

Especially today, when hundreds of thousands of observant Jews in Israel are fully capable of expressing themselves in Hebrew, it is foolish for people to continue thinking that their prayers cannot go beyond the words printed in the siddur.

### DON'T "SAY ALL THE WORDS"!

Prayer as "conversation" doesn't just entail *hiddush*. It also means that a person must recite all his tefillot—even the fixed parts—with the attitude that he is talking to God. This requires concentration. But, as Rabbi Eliezer taught, if a person cannot concentrate then it is absolutely *forbidden* for him to pray.

As we learned in chapter two, later *posekim* made the wise and necessary decision to neutralize Rabbi Eliezer's rule in practice. However, they only made it a requirement to say the major blessings of *tefilla* without *kavvana*, but nothing else. They wanted to preserve the existence of *tefilla*, which would have been lost if people skipped the *Amida* whenever they felt they couldn't concentrate. Indeed, *tefilla* has been preserved by the specific requirement that a person must *always* say the *Amida* and other essential blessings. But what we regard as "prayer" today is much larger than simply *Shema* with its blessings and the *Amida*!

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Petitions." Though the discussion of this matter among the *posekim* became somewhat complicated, the practical implications are clear.

Also, see Orah Hayyim 112 on the rule not to add petitions in first three and last three blessings of the *Amida*. This is because petitions are not *me'en ha-berakha* in blessings that are meant to be totally devoted to praise. See chapter eight on this, especially note 22. (Also see the geonic source mentioned below in note 34.)

5. *Hayyei Adam* 24:19 allows this to be done in any language (cited in *Mishna Berura*).

In the very same paragraph, *Hayyei Adam* suggests that such personal requests should be made directly after the *Amida* so that one can respond to *kedusha*, and this suggestion is also cited with approval by *Mishna Berura*. But even if one accepts the suggestion in principle, the reality is that during weekday *Shaharit* in most synagogues you'll miss *kedusha* anyway unless you rush at a disgraceful rate, even without personal additions. It is certain beyond a shadow of a doubt that *Hayyei Adam* would not justify rushing your *tefilla* at an unreasonable pace in order to respond to *kedusha*. Therefore, since you will probably miss *kedusha* anyway by saying the *Amida* at a reasonable pace, you might as well be sincere and add *bakkashot*. But this position seems to be rejected by Rabbi Avraham ben ha-Rambam (see below, note 22).

In a similar case, *Mishna Berura* (268:19) suggests that a person hurry his prayer on Friday night so that he will not miss reciting *Vaykhulu* together with the congregation. However, *Hazon Ish* (38:10) rejects this suggestion because it is likely that by rushing his prayer a person's loss (in terms of *kavvana* and respect for *tefilla*) will be far greater than his gain (in saying *Vaykhulu*). Of course, *Hazon Ish* wrote this in regard to a lesser obligation than *kedusha*.

This small realization has huge implications. What it means is that, besides the major blessings, if a person cannot concentrate on something in the siddur then he simply shouldn't say it! As Rabbi Eliezer realized, addressing words to God without paying attention is not just a "lack" in the *tefilla*, but real chutzpa towards God Himself; therefore, it is forbidden.

Mindlessly mumbling words to God is nothing less than a disgrace to God, as well as to those who composed the prayer. Furthermore, it is destructive to one's other tefillot, because frequent mumbling can actually train a person to *not* have *kavana*. The more often a person mutters words from the siddur without feeling, the more likely it is that he will learn to mutter them every time, even when he might otherwise have had *kavana*.

I believe it is possible for religious Jews to completely abolish both (1) speed reading and (2) monotones from their tefillot. What this entails, though, is a conscious decision to skip all or part of paragraphs in the siddur when a person knows he cannot maintain *kavana* through it all. This applies to every part of the siddur besides the essential blessings, such as *korbanot*, *pesukei de-zimra*, *tahanun*, *Ashrei*, *Kedusha de-Sidra*, *Alenu*, *Shir Shel Yom*, *Selihot* and *Vidduy*, *Kabbalat Shabbat*, etc. Surely it is better to say two or three chosen sentences from *Tahanun* and mean them, rather than to mumble the whole thing at an impossible speed to finish before *kaddish*! As *Shabbat* begins, to praise God with two or three paragraphs of *Kabbalat Shabbat* slowly, carefully, and with feeling before *Leha Dodi* has more value than rushing through each paragraph to keep up with the *sheli'ah tzibbur*. And could mumbling the entire *Ve-Hu Rahum* (the extended *tahanun* for Mondays and Thursdays) really be preferable to picking just a couple of paragraphs from it, and to really mean it when you ask God to mercifully protect the Jewish people from their cruel enemies?

In order to make the problem absolutely clear, let me describe my personal experiences in "average" *minyanim* that I have visited or prayed with regularly. (The specific examples here will be for *shaharit* alone, but the reader will easily see that the same kinds of things occur for other tefillot as well.) The locations include Orthodox synagogues in America and Israel, yeshivot, and hasidic *shteiblach*.<sup>6</sup> Because of the unrealistic rate at which

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6. I have not been able to escape the impression (and it is admittedly a subjective one based on my own experiences) that *minyanim* of yeshiva students and former students tend to be less rushed and more serious during average weekdays than hasidic *shteiblach*. Why this should be true puzzles me. Early *hasidut*, after all, was perhaps most controversial for the great stress it placed on *tefilla*, sometimes even above Torah study. But nowadays, it is the non-hasidic yeshivot that seem to place the most emphasis on really pronouncing the words and trying to focus on their meaning. Why does it seem that the tremendous emphasis *hasidim* place on their *nosah* and customs for *tefilla* don't have a positive impact towards making daily prayer a powerful emotional experience for so many *hasidim*?

Of course, there are many groups of *hasidim* in various places that are well-known for their moving tefillot. (Though even for such groups, the impression is usually for the tefillot of *Shabbat* and *Yom Tov*, not daily prayer.) And admittedly, my whole impression may not accurately reflect the full picture of daily *tefilla* among

tefillot are read (supposedly!) in these places, I usually say only a small part of *pesukei de-zimra*, then start the blessings of *Shema* together with the *sheli'ah tzibbur* after *Barekhu*. But I wind up beginning the *Amida* very late, and sometimes only finish it when the *sheli'ah tzibbur* is done with *Tahanun*.<sup>7</sup> By the time I am done with the second *Ashrei* (having started again with the *tzibbur*), the *shatz* has usually begun the *kaddish* following *U-Va Le-Tziyyon*. It goes without saying that the various *mizmorim* and other paragraphs (including *Aleynu*) at the end of *Shaharit*, each one followed by *kaddish*, are absolutely impossible. In most *minyanim*, well less than thirty seconds are allowed for each one, and then one must stop and respond to *kaddish*.<sup>8</sup>

Again, I do not claim that it takes me so long because I achieve a serious level of *kavvana* each time. I wish that this was true, but it is not. Rather, the simple but devastating truth is that it *objectively* takes this long just to pronounce the words at the same pace as a normal human being speaks to another person with even a modicum of feeling. Just to say the words, even without much *kavvana*, is physically impossible at the rate most religious Jews pray! For those who doubt my time estimates, I can do nothing more than ask them to time themselves and their own respective *shelihei tzibbur*. But the practical conclusion from our study of Rabbi Eliezer's rule in chapter two must be that if by trying to keep pace with the *shatz* and "say everything" a person knows that he will wind up just routinely mumbling, then it is wrong for him to do so. It is far better for him to say less to God, but respectfully, than to say more without *derekh erez* (basic courtesy).

It is worth mentioning the important point made by Uriel Simon yet a second time here. (His remarks were quoted more fully in chapter one.) He stated a very simple idea when he wrote, "And worst of all: try to pray at the pace of the *sheli'ah tzibbur*, and you will very quickly need to choose between a rushed mumbling of all the tefillot, or saying just some of them while paying attention. Most people who pray choose the first way, and therefore the time of prayer is not a time of effortful, spiritual and soulful labor." Though Simon's point may have seemed obvious to some readers even in chapter one, its devastating accuracy and importance become much clearer in the context of the present discussion, and in light of the background of the previous chapters.

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contemporary *hasidim*. I hope that my future experiences regarding this will prove me to have been entirely mistaken!

7. It is unfortunate that I usually cannot start with the *tzibbur*. But according to *Yabia Omer* 2:7:5-6, it is still considered *tefilla be-tzibbur* to say the *Amida* during *hazarat ha-shatz*. On whether it would be better to start the *Amida* earlier, see below, note 22.

8. The prayers at the end of *Shaharit* are not obligatory in nature, nor is there any prohibition against interrupting them to answer *kaddish*, which in itself constitutes a formal obligation. Since responding to *kaddish* is obligatory at these points (see below, note 23, for the source of this), but such responses effectively make it impossible to say the passages at the end of *Shaharit* with *kavvana*, perhaps it is better not to say them at all along with the *tzibbur*.

The best practical example of this problem is *pesukei de-zimra*. These “verses of song,” which are meant to praise God before the main *tefilla*, certainly don’t sound like poetry to anyone who hears them recited during *shaharit*. At best one hears clear chanting in a monotone, but usually *pesukei de-zimra* just sounds like dull mumbling. *Pesukei de-zimra* serves an important purpose, of course: Hazal insisted that a person should always praise God before *tefilla* (as we will discuss more fully below), but it is obvious that they weren’t obligating every person to push through ten-to-fifteen pages of biblical poetry every single morning (over twenty pages on Shabbat). Actually, various parts of what we call *pesukei de-zimra* were added gradually over the centuries.<sup>9</sup> The only specific reference to *pesukei de-zimra* in the Talmud occurs as an item in a list of one scholar’s personal wishes:

Rabbi Yose said: “Let my lot be with those who finish *hallel* every morning.” Can this be true? But did not Mar say, “One who reads *hallel* every day is a blasphemer”!? Regarding what did [Rabbi Yose] say this? Regarding *pesukei de-zimra* (*Shabbat* 118b).

In other words, Rabbi Yose and Mar used the word *hallel* to refer to two different sets of psalms. Mar seems to mean the set of psalms (113–118) known as *Hallel ha-Mitzri* (“Egyptian *Hallel*”) because it mentions the exodus from Egypt. Those psalms may only be said on certain special days. Instead of this, Rashi identified Rabbi Yose’s *pesukei de-zimra* (in the gemara’s conclusion) as psalms 148 and 150, which one may say every day. However, regardless of exactly what text *pesukei de-zimra* referred to, this passage seems to describe a pious practice and not an obligation.<sup>10</sup> As late

9. See the relevant chapters in *Netiv Bina*, vol. 1.

The Talmud does not identify which psalms (or other *shirah*) are meant by the title *pesukei de-zimra*. The earliest designations are those in the *siddurim* of the geonim, who identified the last six psalms (145–150), or at least some of these six. Alfasi on *Shabbat* 118b did the same, though Rashi (followed by Ran) picked only two of the six besides *Ashrei*: 148 and 150. It may be that these two were chosen because only they begin with the verb “*hallel*” in the imperative plural “*hallelu*” (Praise God!), calling on others to praise Him.

Regardless of exactly what the gemara meant by *pesukei de-zimra*, it seems that Rabbi Yose ben Halaftha introduced the custom as one of many special practices which he chose to follow, but never intended it to be an *obligation* (though Rabbi Ovadia Yosef disagrees with this; see the following note). It is also possible that he was not referring to any specific text at all.

Over the centuries, customs began to incorporate ever more biblical selections, or even collections of single verses. Reciting *Shirat ha-Yam* (Exodus 15:1–18), for instance, is first recorded by the geonim, one of whom (Saadya) called the custom “nice” but pointed out that there is no obligation attached to it. For further information on the development of *pesukei di-zimra* in geonic times, see Lawrence A. Hoffman, *The Canonization of the Synagogue Service* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), pp. 127–128, 130–134.

10. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef mustered strong proofs for a different conclusion reading this passage. In his interpretation, even Rabbi Yose’s list concerned formal obliga-

as the tenth century, Saadya Gaon held that *pesukei de-zimra* is not a formal obligation:

Our nation has taken upon itself [*hitnaddevah*] to read psalms, several praises to the Holy One, Blessed is He, as well as two blessings before and after them. And it was established to do this, because a believer makes a blessing for everything that happens from the time he wakes up until the time for prayer.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, even the two blessings of *pesukei de-zimra* were enacted for a practice which is not essentially an obligation! Most later authorities, however, assumed that there was a formal obligation involved. This view seems to be based on a different passage:

Rabbi Simla'i taught: A person must always arrange the praises of the Holy One, Blessed is He, and pray afterwards. How do we know this? From Moses, as it is written (Deuteronomy), "I pleaded with the Lord at that time" followed by "O Lord God, You who let Your servant see the first works of Your greatness and Your mighty hand, You whose powerful deeds no god in heaven or on earth can equal!" And only afterwards is it written, "Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land, etc." (*Berakhot* 32a citing Deuteronomy 4:23–25).

Thus, *pesukei de-zimra* is meant to praise God before petitionary prayer, just as Moses praised God before he pleaded with Him to enter the Land of Israel. But praise for God has only a negative value if it is not sincere, and that is why the *Shulhan 'Arukh* emphasizes that *pesukei de-zimra* must be said carefully, not rushed (*Orah Hayyim* 51:8). Thus, if a person knows that forcing himself to recite all parts of *pesukei de-zimra* by the time the congregation finishes will mean that he will not be able praise God sincerely in any of them, then he should skip some. At that point, it is not omitting verses that is disgraceful, but to say them!

Many people will find it difficult to follow this advice because they feel rushed by the rapid pace of a typical Ashkenazic *sheli'ah tzibbur*, who usually announces the "completion" of another *mizmor* every twenty to thirty seconds. It really is uncomfortable to say a couple of chosen *mizmorim* at a relaxed pace while the rest of the *tzibbur* rushes through all of *pesukei de-zimra*. One possible solution is to eliminate the *sheli'ah tzibbur's* task during *pesukei de-zimra*. Have him not announce anything after *Barukh she-Amar* until *Yishtabah*, so that each person will be able say the parts he chooses at a rate he finds comfortable. I have not seen it myself, but I have been told that in some major yeshivot the *sheli'ah tzibbur* does not begin at

tions, but obligations that most people are lax about fulfilling. See *Yabia' Omer*, vol. 5, 7:5. I simply pointed out the "first impression" that most readers have of Rabbi Yose's words.

11. *Siddur Rav Sa'adya Ga'on* (Jerusalem: Reuben Mas, reprinted 1970, 1941), p. 32.

all until *Yishtabah*. This allows each person to say *pesukei de-zimra* at his own pace.

Also, even though some authorities permit “making up” parts of *pesukei de-zimra* after *shaharit* if a person didn’t have time to say all of it at the proper time, these same authorities make it clear that this is *not* an obligation. Therefore, it clearly must *not* be done if “making it up” will be rote recitation without feeling.<sup>12</sup>

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12. “Making up” *pesukei de-zimra* after *shaharit* (but without its blessings) is recommended by Rabbi Yosef Karo in *Orach Hayyim* 52:1 for a person who had no time to say *any* of it before *shaharit*. But it is clear, as he himself pointed out in *Beit Yosef*, that even he does not consider it *obligatory* to do this.

Moreover, other authorities actually *prohibit* this practice. The dispute is based on the view of Rav Natronai Gaon as quoted in the *Tur* (52):

If a person came to the synagogue late and found the community at the end of *pesukei de-zimra*—people asked Rav Natronai Gaon about this matter: May he pray together with the community and say *pesukei de-zimra* afterwards? He replied that one may not do this, because [the rabbis] established them preceding prayer. Rather, one should say “*Barukh she-Amar*” until “*mehullal ba-tishbahot*,” and then say “*Tehilla le-David*,” skip until “*Hallelu El be-kodsho*” and say “*Kol ha-neshama tehalal Yah Halleluya*,” and finish with “*Yishtabah*” and rush to pray with the community. But after prayer he may not say any them at all [*otam . . . kol ikkar*].

According to Bah, *kol ikkar* means that no part of *pesukei de-zimra* may be said after *Shaharit*, neither the biblical sections nor the blessings. This is because of Rabbi Simlai’s teaching that praises are appropriate before petitionary prayer. To “make up” *pesukei de-zimra* after petitionary prayer defeats its true purpose! Indeed, it is forbidden because it reveals a lack of awe for God.

The interpretation of Bah is supported by the language of the geonim. Rav Natronai Gaon and Rav Moshe Gaon, as quoted in *Siddur Rav Amram*, held that “there is something unseemly about this practice [*yesh genai ba-davar*]” of “making up” *mizmorim* after *shaharit* (Hoffman, pp. 131, 184). It seems that no part of *pesukei de-zimra* is acceptable after *shaharit*.

But Rabbi Yosef Karo (in *Beit Yosef*) disagrees. Instead, he accepts the opinion of Rashba that when the geonim forbade “making up” *pesukei de-zimra* after *shaharit* they were only referring to the blessings, but not to the biblical verses of praise. For the latter there can be no prohibition, because it is always praiseworthy to recite psalms and other praises; as Rabbi Yohanan said in the Talmud: “If only people would say them all day long!” It is based on this that in the *Shulhan Arukh* he recommends “making up” the individual psalms after *shaharit*. However, this is clearly *not* an obligation, as *Arukh ha-Shulhan* pointed out (52:4), because the quotation “If only people would say them all day long!” specifically indicates a pious practice, not an obligation.

For our purposes (the idea of not “saying everything” in prayer), the fact that “making up” *pesukei de-zimra* is *not* an obligation is crucial. If we agree, based on our conclusion in chapter two, that rote recitation must be eliminated based on Rabbi Eliezer’s rule, then “making up” *pesukei de-zimra* after *shaharit* may even be *forbidden* if it will not be said with *kavvana*!

In addition, it is noteworthy that kabbalistic notions have had a direct impact on

Furthermore, each person has his own particular relationship with Hashem, a relationship which changes from day to day. This implies that, at times, a person will identify better with certain *mizmorim* than he will with others. In this case, he may best praise Hashem by reading those that inspire him, even at the expense of some others.

It may be argued that since there are halakhic priorities regarding the *mizmorim* of *pesukei de-zimra* (i.e., which have precedence over the others when there isn't time to say them all), then a person really isn't free to pick and choose among them. I don't think that the objection is completely valid, because the halakha's assumption is that one's *kavvana* will be the same for all them. In other words: the halakha regards certain verses of *shevah* (praise) as more important than others. But if you know that saying certain "important" verses will not really be *shevah* at all, but rote muttering instead, then perhaps you can and should instead recite a "less important" *mizmor* if that will inspire *yirat Hashem*. This would only apply, however, to those sections whose recitation is based on custom, not those for which a formal obligation exists.<sup>13</sup>

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the laws of "making up" *pesukei de-zimra* after *shaharit*. Contrary to the halakha, some kabbalists held that a person should *always* say the entire *pesukei de-zimra* in order before *shaharit*, even if that will cause him not to say the *Amida* with the congregation! (See the various commentaries on *Orah Hayyim* 52:1, such as *Mishna Berura*.) The reason for this has to do with arousing the *sefira* called *tiferet* (through *pesukei de-zimra*) before the *sefira* of *malhut* (through the *Amida*).

As we saw in chapter four, the kabbalistic view of prayer almost always put great stress on reciting the exact text of the *siddur* in order. In this case, the tendency is taken so far that it actually contradicts the halakha! Jacob Katz noted that the deviation from the halakha was conscious, too. There was one major halakhic authority (Rabbenu Yonah) who held that the entire *pesukei de-zimra*, including its blessings, may be "made up" after *shaharit*. This opinion was rejected by most other authorities (see *Perisha* on *Tur* 92, 2–3), but kabbalists still had to explain how even one *posek* could doubt the necessity of saying *shaharit* in the right order. Therefore, they claimed that those who permitted "making up" *pesukei de-zimra* arrived at this conclusion only because they had no access to kabbalistic traditions and teachings, but if they had known the kabbala they would have concluded otherwise! See Katz's *Halakha ve-Kabbala* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984), p. 86. To this day, some *hasidim* continue to advocate always saying all of *pesukei de-zimra* before *shaharit*, even at the expense of *tefilla be-tzibbur*.

In any case, later authorities reconciled the halakhic approach with the kabbalistic approach. *Mishna Berura*, for instance, accepts the halakha that *pesukei de-zimra* should be shortened or omitted if it will prevent praying with the community. But, because he is aware of the kabbalistic view, he says that this must not be done for any other reason (52:1, quoting *Hakham Tzvi*'s solution to this problem in *siman* 36). This insistence that normally all of *pesukei de-zimra* must be recited is rooted in the kabbalistic view; it is in spite of the fact that most parts of *pesukei de-zimra* are based on custom, not halakha.

13. In the *Shulhan Arukh* (*Orah Hayyim* 52), three factors decide which parts of *pesukei de-zimra* take precedence over the others when one cannot recite all of them:

- (1) In general, it is considered more important to recite those *mizmorim* that were identified as *pesukei de-zimra* by the earliest authorities (see above note 9).



To return to our primary topic, if you want to stop mumbling altogether the key is to decide to recite each *tefilla* as if you really mean it, clearly and with feeling, and to simply skip what you can't say without feeling. Saying *tefillot* "like you mean them" each and every time certainly does not guarantee that you'll also have *kavvana* every time. On the contrary, slow recitation and the right tone of voice can also become habits! A teacher of mine in high school once pointed out that no matter how long a person takes for his *Amida*, he still may not have *kavvana*. Rather, he said, the way to tell if a person has *kavvana* during the *Amida* is not by how long he takes but by how much his speed *varies* each time. A person whose *Amida* takes him the same exact amount of time every time he says it cannot be having *kavvana*, even if he prays very slowly. On the contrary, he has simply trained himself to pray slowly! No one can always achieve *kavvana* to exactly the same extent each time, nor achieve it in precisely the same way. Even a person who really tries to mean what he says will still fail at times; and when he does succeed, he will not be repeating an experience that he has had before. Rather, it will be a new experience with new emphasis, and will probably last a different amount of time.

What, then, is the advantage to only saying *tefillot* to sound "like you mean them" (even when you really have no *kavvana*)? The answer is that it is not an end in itself, but the means to a better goal. If praying "like you mean it" simply reinforces a new habit then it has failed. Rather, it is a strategy to break the cycle of mindless muttering at impossible speeds, thereby giving the pray-er at least a *chance* to contemplate what he is saying. Perhaps, if he has this opportunity, then at least sometimes he will take

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- (2) The halakha also favors complete selections, as opposed to the collections of individual verses found in *Hodu* (starting with the words *ve-Hu rahum*) and *Yehi Khavod*.
  - (3) Additionally, sections that it is customary to recite daily (*tadir*) have preference over those that are added on Shabbat and *Yom Tov*.

Can better *kavvana* or sincerity for certain sections be considered an additional factor?

The last two factors do not seem to have the weight to compel a person to recite texts for which he will have less *kavvana*. After all, if the central obligation is to praise God sincerely, then even collections of verses, or those not said daily, serve to fulfil that obligation if they are said with *kavvana*. But even whole sections which are recited daily do not if they are said without *kavvana*.

As for the first factor, most authorities considered the "decree" to recite *pesukei de-zimra* with blessings to have been about *specific* psalms. This is apparently what Rashi meant when he wrote that psalms 148 and 150 are the "central aspect [*ikkar*]" of *pesukei de-zimra*. (Also see *Beit Yosef* on *Tur* 52 about *Ashrei*, and para. 7 in the *Shulhan Arukh*.) Because of these views, the formal halakhic requirement certainly must take precedence over subjective considerations of *kavvana*. *Ashrei* and the following psalms should be recited according to the levels of priority described in *Orah Hayyim* 52 regardless of how much *kavvana* one can have for them.

Also see *Iggerot Moshe*, *Orah Hayyim* 2:16 on whether the various parts of *pesukei de-zimra* must be said in any particular order.

advantage of it and really talk to God sincerely. Again, praying "like you mean it" does nothing more than create the *possibility* for *kavvana*. But that possibility does not exist for a person who has thoroughly trained himself to rush through page after page of the siddur.

For example, a few years ago I made a "deal" with myself regarding *Birkat ha-Mazon*. I usually found myself rushing through it, largely because I knew I couldn't concentrate throughout the entire prayer. Therefore, I decided that I would omit most of the *harahamans* on condition that I said the four essential blessings at a reasonable pace, and with feeling rather than in a monotone.

The result was not that I always have *kavvana* for *Birkat ha-Mazon*. On the contrary, most often I don't. But my "deal" did achieve one important thing: now, when I do concentrate, I am sometimes able to do so through all four blessings. This is simply because I'm now used to pronouncing them as a prayer should be said, rather than habitually rushing through them. When I said all the *harahamans* I found it impossible to break the habit of rushing because I was intimidated by the length of the text, knowing that I knew I could not possibly maintain *kavvana* for the entire time.

In general, a longer text is a greater enemy of *kavvana*. Most people realize unconsciously that, despite their best efforts, they will never be able to read through dozens pages of the siddur every day and mean even a small fraction of what they say. That is the main reason why they rush through the pages instead. Just as speeches tend to mean less the longer they take, each additional text to recite from the siddur increases the chances for monotony.

There are few pieces of literature anywhere that can compare to the moving pleas of the long *ve-Hu Rahum* or the grandeur of the *mizmorim* in *pesukei de-zimra*. Yet most people realize that they cannot meaningfully recite either of these collections in their entirety on a frequent basis. There are simply too many pages! I estimate that it would take almost half an hour for a person to say the entire *pesukei de-zimra* at the pace of normal speech, and over forty minutes on Shabbat. (Truthfully, sincere prayer should be even *slower* than one's normal rate of speech, as it would be in a carefully delivered plea to a human king. For the sake of argument, however, let us deal with talking at the rate of day to day conversation.) Most synagogues do not allow nearly this much time. But even if more time was allowed (as it is in some yeshivot), only rare individuals could concentrate for so long! The only solution I see is to choose certain parts and read them "like you mean them" in awe of the fact that they are addressed to God.<sup>14</sup>

What also needs to be done to abolish mumbling is to make sure there

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14. Perhaps the worst example of the rush to "say everything" in an impossibly short period of time is the attempt many people make to recite the *piyyutim* in *selihot* and *kinnot*, as well as the *hoshanot* during Sukkot (especially on Hoshana Rabba). Here, it becomes crucial to make a judgement about how much recitation is truly valuable. This will be discussed at length later in this chapter.

is adequate time for the essential blessings, mainly the blessings of *Shema* (including *Shema* itself, of course) and the nineteen blessings of the *Amida*. The fact is that these blessings are really not all that long in terms of pages. It is essential to train both children and adults to recite them at a relaxed pace, with care and emotion, *even if this must be at the expense of other parts of shaharit*.

Those who insist on rushing through *shaharit* at impossible speeds on weekday mornings because they know that people have to leave for work are reacting to a legitimate problem, but they have adopted the wrong solution. Judaism acknowledges the realities of life: time is precious and our daily schedules can be extremely demanding. The halakha opposes any arbitrary lengthening of *tefilla* or *keri'at ha-Torah* (Torah reading) by dubbing it *tirha de-tzibbura* (a burden on the community).<sup>15</sup> However, to rush through everything is *not* the right way to avoid *tirha de-tzibbura*! Rather, the correct approach is to decide which parts of *tefilla* are the highest priorities, and to treat these parts seriously. Surely, *keri'at Shema* and the *Amida* are higher priorities than *korbanot* and “all” of *pesukei de-zimra* (as important as these things may be). They are certainly more important than extra repetitions of *kaddish* and *mi she-berakh*, both of which take up relatively great amounts of time but are of dubious halakhic validity! Having *kavvana* for the blessings instituted by Hazal is our primary obligation during *tefilla*, and it must take precedence. Therefore, solve the “time” problem by reducing the many minutes spent on other things.

Let me emphasize that my proposal need not change a single letter in the printed text of the *siddur*, and very little in the structure of *tefilla be-tzibbur*. Clearly, any text found in the *siddur* is only there because important rabbinic authorities have supported its recitation at one time or another. Each and every prayer fulfils a true Torah value. What I propose is not, God forbid, to expunge any *tefilla*, but for each individual to *first* devote himself to reciting the central parts of *tefilla* “like he means them.” If *after* devoting significant time, energy, feeling and concentration to certain *mizmorim* in *pesukei de-zimra* he finds that he is able to do the same for the rest, then of course he should do so! Similarly, if a person trains himself to recite *birkhot*

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15. Hazal were very strict about *tirha de-tzibbura* (not keeping the congregation for longer than is necessary). For example: the Torah could only be rolled during the few seconds that the *meturgeman* (translator) spoke after each verse, but no further. Prayers were shortened so as not to keep the congregation from their duties for too long. A *sheli'ah tzibbur* who made certain errors—who in principle should have been required to start *hazarat ha-shatz* all over again—was not to do so because of *tirha de-tzibbura*. In later times, one factor that led some authorities to allow *Ma'ariv* to be recited before the stars were visible was that the people should not be kept waiting so long after *Minha* (nor could they be expected to go back to the synagogue an extra time).

For a full discussion of *tirha de-tzibbura*, including explanations and references for all of the above examples, see the essay on it in *Encyclopedia Talmudit* 20, cols. 662–678. There are numerous practices in today's synagogues that should be questioned based on this principle. *Veha-meivin yavin*.

*keri'at Shema* and the *Amida* slowly and carefully, with feeling and with *hiddush*, and finds afterwards that he still time and energy left to do the same for the entire long *tahanun* and all the paragraphs at the end of *shaharit*, then there is undoubtably great value in his doing so. My experience is, however, that making a serious effort during the central *tefillot* inevitably results in cutting back on the time and energy I can invest in other parts of *shaharit*. The essential point is that quality, and not quantity, is important in prayer: "It is the same whether one does more or less, as long as he directs his heart to heaven."<sup>16</sup>

Thus, all of my suggestions are meant primarily for individual pray-ers, not for changes in the structure of congregational prayer. In fact, the only significant change that I propose for *tefilla be-tzibbur* is regarding the allocation of time. I am not saying anything new by suggesting that all of *Shaharit* be planned around *Shema* (with its blessings) and the *Amida*, for which ample time and effort must be invested towards *kavvana*. As we saw in chapter two, *kavvana* for these parts is the central halakhic requirement to be met during *shaharit*. Ideally, generous amounts of time should be allotted as well for whatever else is recited, and this is indeed done in some yeshivot. But when this is *not* feasible, priorities must be reconsidered. As I mentioned above, a partial solution may involve eliminating many time-consuming customs with no halakhic value at all, such as reciting *mi she-berakh* numerous times, or saying many extra *kaddeshim*; this is already done in numerous yeshivot and synagogues.

In short, "saying everything" has no intrinsic value in Jewish prayer. On the contrary, the sense of having to "say everything" overwhelms too many observant Jews and makes them lose sight of the highest value in *tefilla*, namely *kavvana*. *Tefilla* must be structured to allow a person to say each *tefilla* like he means it. But Rabbi Eliezer's rule must be invoked outside of the central blessings, so that if a person knows he cannot say other parts of *tefilla* with *kavvana* then he should simply omit them. "Saying everything" without *kavvana* has no value if *tefilla* is a true conversation with God. On the contrary, it is detrimental and a committed Jew must try to avoid it.

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16. In its original context, this famous quotation addressed not prayer but the issue of sacrifices. According to the Mishna, it did not matter whether a Jew brought an expensive offering to the Temple or an inexpensive one, as long as his intentions were sincere and honorable (*Menahot* 110a). The gemara twice applies the same words to Torah study as well (*Berakhot* 5a, 17a), so it is obvious that the idea may be also applied in contexts other than the sacrifices. Interestingly, *Tur* (*Orah Hayyim* 1) adapted the quotation so that it would apply to prayer (specifically to the prayer called *tikkun hatzot*): "One should cast his supplication before God. It is the same whether one says more or less, as long as he directs his heart in his supplications [*u-vilvad she-yekhavin libbo be-tahanunav*]."

People who recite Psalms regularly should be aware of *Arukh ha-Shulhan's* comment: "This is the true for everything like Torah study, recitation of Psalms, and other similar things. A little with *kavvana* is better than a lot without *kavvana*" (1:21).

## MONOTONES

Saying prayers “like you mean them” doesn’t just mean to say them slowly and pronounce them correctly. It also means using the right tone of voice for each sentence. It means that some things should be said in a pained voice, and inspire tears or groans: “They crush Your people, O Lord, they afflict Your very own; they kill the widow and the stranger; they murder the fatherless, thinking, ‘The Lord does not see it, the God of Jacob does not pay heed!’” (psalm 94, recited each Wednesday).

Yet other parts of the siddur ought to inspire smiles or laughter: “Sing to the Lord a new song, His praises in the congregation of the faithful! Let Israel rejoice in its maker, let the children of Zion exult in their king!” (psalm 149, recited every morning in *pesukei de-zimra*.) It is incredible that both psalms 94 and 149 are usually chanted (by Sephardim) or mumbled (by Ashkenazim) in the same dull monotone! There is no terror or anguish felt when saying psalm 94, no joy associated with psalm 149; both are just rushed words which those who say them obviously do not feel in their hearts. Unfortunately, there are dozens of similar examples.

Pronunciation, in fact, is only a small part of saying something “like you mean it.” Though it is encouraging to see a young generation of *ba’alei tefilla* (prayer leaders) being produced in certain yeshivot who are knowledgeable about the most obscure details of Hebrew pronunciation,<sup>17</sup> the truth is that these details are really just minor side issues when it comes to improving the sense of prayer in our time. In fact, sometimes the grammar gets in the way! The problem is that if *tefilla* is supposed to be a “conversation” with God and we should speak to Him “like we mean it,” then being overly obsessive about details of pronunciation that are otherwise ignored in Hebrew can take away a lot from one’s intimate communication with God. People sometimes overemphasize such details so much that their *tefillot* sound completely artificial. I am too much of a purist to suggest that small but important aspects of pronunciation such as the *sheva na’* or the *dagesh hazak* be dropped entirely in *tefilla*, but a happy medium should be found.

For the same reason, Israelis and others who are most comfortable with the system of pronunciation employed in modern spoken Hebrew should say their prayers and read the Torah the same way. They should not sacrifice their *kavvana* and their ease in expressing themselves to God for the sake of the traditional pronunciation of their ancestors, nor does the *halakha* obligate them to do so. The former Sephardic Chief Rabbi Uziel of

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17. A pet peeve on a highly technical issue: some talented *ba’alei keriah* emphasize the *mappik heh* to a ridiculous extent when they read the Torah. It is only meant to indicate that *heh*, which is usually a silent *em keriah* at the end of a word, is pronounced when there is a *mappik*. In other words, one should hear a light, normal “H” sound, rather than a silent letter.

Also: the word in *Hallel* that ends with a *mappik heh* is not pronounced like Hawaiian “aloha!” It is supposed to be “*elo’ah Ya’akov*” (Psalms 114:7). This is a *patah ganuv*. Just as *patah* is pronounced before a *het* at the end of a word, it is also pronounced before any other guttural consonant (such as *heh*).

blessed memory made this point clearly when he addressed the topic. (It should be noted that when he refers to "Sephardic" pronunciation he means the sounds of modern spoken Hebrew, though he himself was undoubtedly aware that this commonly-made equation is not entirely accurate):

In my humble opinion it is appropriate to say: This [changing to Israeli pronunciation] is not forbidden because of "do not abandon the teaching of your mother" [Proverbs 1:8, a verse typically quoted to emphasize that it is forbidden to change a custom]. Because [in this case] changing this custom is not my desire. Rather, it is forced upon me since the public language at home and in the street, and especially at public gatherings, is all in the Sephardic pronunciation. Since people have accustomed themselves to do this willingly, it is also imperative to change the pronunciation in synagogues, because *it is impossible for a person to switch his regular pronunciation that he uses every day to a different one during prayer*. What will the younger generation do, which was educated in schools in Israel and the Diaspora where they teach all of their studies in our holy tongue in the Sephardic pronunciation? They never even learned the Ashkenazic pronunciation in the first place, and they cannot enunciate it with their tongues! Therefore, for such people the custom of their fathers has become forgotten. They have not changed it, but it has completely changed for them in their mouths. Since this is the case it is reasonable to say that this is not a matter of "do not abandon the teaching of your mother."<sup>18</sup>

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18. *Piskei Uziel bi-She'elot Ha-Zeman* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kuk, 1970), p. 18 (the emphasis is mine). On the other hand, it is well-known that numerous present day authorities have also objected to this practice; for the most prominent example, see *Iggerot Moshe* (*Orah Hayyim* 3:5). Rav Kuk also felt very strongly that changing pronunciation was wrong; he taught that each system of pronunciation was somehow appropriate in a spiritual way to the community that used it. But it is crucial to note that all of these opinions view Hebrew pronunciation on a *private* level, mostly as a language of prayer and Torah study. Even Rav Kuk, who envisioned a greater role for Hebrew, lived in a time when no one pronunciation had won absolute dominance as the national language.

Therefore, Rabbi Uziel would probably respond that if a person regularly communicates using the typical pronunciation of modern Hebrew, then that has already become "his" pronunciation *de facto*, regardless of how he prays or reads the Torah! The phenomenon of Ashkenazic Israeli yeshiva students who speak modern Hebrew all day long but pray with the pronunciation that their fathers used in Europe makes no halakhic sense at all, unless it is assumed that one's pronunciation is determined *solely* by his Hebrew prayer and not at all by his Hebrew conversation. However, if *tefilla* is to be a "conversation" with God, then for a person to pray using a system of pronunciation in which he would not be able to comfortably conduct an ordinary conversation must ruin his *kavvana* to some degree, and will severely limit his ability to add *hiddush* to his prayers.

In a recently published *teshuva* from manuscripts left by Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi Yehuda Unterman of blessed memory, he also noted that the reality has changed radically since Rav Kuk's time, and that the "modern" pronunciation has become the

The most important part of saying tefillot "like you mean them" is not grammar or pronunciation, nor even understanding, but meaning what you say and *feeling* it. Knowing what the words mean is a prerequisite, because you cannot not mean them if you do not understand them. Correct pronunciation is important too, because what you say must make sense to you in order for you to mean it. But according to our working definition in this chapter, neither correct pronunciation and nor even an understanding of the words constitutes *kavvana*. When a person really has *kavvana*, when he really means what he says, is when "his mouth and his heart agree" as some have described it: when the heart *feels* the meaning of the words that the tongue recites. In other words, it is when a person really talks to God. It is possible to tell when this occurs by a person's facial expression during prayer, by other bodily gestures, and most of all by the tone of his voice. If there is no feeling in his voice, only words without emotion, then *keva* has triumphed in his *tefilla*.

One more factor that encourages mumbling and monotones is the habit some people have of doing other things while they say their tefillot. It is not uncommon to see people pacing back and forth while they pray, sometimes staring in different directions. Furthermore, many people who are well aware that they may not interrupt *tefilla* by talking speech still have no qualms about making hand motions and other silent gestures to communicate while they go on muttering words from the siddur! If we really mean what we say during *tefilla*, then at the very least we should *pause* while we gesture to someone else about what is (presumably) a very urgent matter. It is to prevent behaviors like these that the *Shulhan Arukh* requires a person to stand humbly in the same position he would take before a human king while he prays, and even prohibits him from holding anything in his hands because this may distract him (except for a siddur, if that helps him to say his prayers better).<sup>19</sup> Rather, he is to stand with his head bent looking

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dominant force. He naturally assumed that if a person speaks Israeli Hebrew in day to day life, then there is no reason for him to shift his pronunciation for *tefilla* or for *keri'at ha-Torah*. In fact, he considers it *forbidden* to tell a person to do so when he reads the Torah or leads the tefillot! The overriding factor in any of these situations is peace; different systems of pronunciation should never be allowed to become forces that cause anger or divisions between Jews who pray. See *Shevet mi-Yehuda mi-Ketav Yad* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harov Kuh, 1992), pp. 16–19. The *teshuvah* includes references to the important literature on this topic, including a number of less publicized *teshuvot*. Rabbi Unterman is also cited with complete agreement in *Yabi'a Omer*, vol. 6, 11:5. Rabbi Yosef adds another factor: it will be easier to influence Israeli youth and bring them closer to Torah and *tefilla* if synagogues use a pronunciation that is not alien to them.

19. Is it better to close your eyes and pray by heart, or to read prayers? The *aharonim* (see the standard commentaries on *Orah Hayyim* 93 and 96) make it perfectly clear that a person should choose between praying with his eyes closed or praying from a siddur solely based on which way he will have better *kavvana*. It is an completely personal choice: Which way will better help you mean what you say to God?

Though an unexpected number of contemporary scholars stress that people

downwards and with his hands clasped over his heart “like a servant before his master with awe and fear, imagining that he stands in the Holy Temple” (*Orah Hayyim* 95). While it is true that these stringent requirements are meant for the *Amida* specifically, this in no way implies that distracting behaviors are not equally reprehensible during other parts of *tefilla* when a person also talks to God.<sup>20</sup> (Recall Rava’s harsh statement, quoted at the

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should *always* read their prayers from a siddur, those who say this usually base their view on mystical assumptions (it is no accident that the recommendation to always pray from a siddur is usually quoted in the name of Rabbi Isaac Luria, or by those who follow the letter-mysticism of *hasidut*) or on the simple idea that actually seeing the words helps one concentrate on them better and prevents mistakes. These two points are completely legitimate. However, I cannot agree that *everyone* gains *kavvana* through the act of reading.

Personally, I went through two stages in regard to this question. For a number of years I made a special effort to always pronounce the words slowly, clearly, and correctly (while reading from a siddur, of course). By doing this every single day, before long I knew the important blessings by heart, and especially the *Amida*. At that point, I found that closing my eyes and talking to God while not reading from a siddur was much better for my *kavvana* than continuing to read from the siddur.

I think I prefer praying by heart mostly because of the issue of *hiddush*. When reading from the siddur, I feel more bound to the text and less able to use my own words at times. To me, the very act of *reading* a prayer reinforces the mentality that prayer is a matter of reciting prescribed words and nothing more. But when I close my eyes and do not see printed words, the conversation with God becomes a more personal one, even within the fixed overall structure of the blessings.

In a way, I think I followed Heinemann’s model for *nosah* in rabbinic prayer, though I didn’t consciously intend to do so at the time (when I was entirely unaware of his views). In chapter eight we learned that in his opinion, a Jew in rabbinic times would adopt one basic *nosah* or learn one from the *sheli’ah tzibbur*. After he learned such a *nosah* he would keep it as the foundation of his prayers, but would continually make personal innovations based upon it. Nowadays, one learns a *nosah* through a printed siddur rather than through a *sheli’ah tzibbur*, but the principle remains the same: after you master the basic structure of the blessings through adopting a *nosah* and practising it until you know it well, you can then pray independently and innovate based on that *nosah*, instead of slavishly repeating the words of the siddur.

I am sure that reading from the siddur is the best choice for many people, but it is definitely not the best choice for everyone. In particular, I strongly suspect that many people who have prayed daily for their entire lives, yet still claim that they cannot say the important blessings by heart without using a siddur, do not really *pronounce* the words every day. They may mumble the words at a ridiculous pace every day, but one cannot learn the prayers by heart that way. If they said the words carefully and with feeling every day, many of these people would become confident saying them without a siddur within a relatively short period of time. Only then can they make a realistic decision about which way is really better for *kavvana*.

20. There is no textual proof for this, but it is a common sense conclusion based on much of our previous study. *Taz on Orah Hayyim* (96:1) also suggests that what the gemara considered to be distracting behaviors during the *Amida* should be avoided during other prayers too. *Peri Hadash* (*Mishbetzot Zahav* 96) writes, “‘Prayer’ [i.e., the *Amida*] is not meant specifically; the same applies to reading *Shema* and



beginning of chapter two, about those who act “overly familiar with God”!) This means that saying a *tefilla* “like we mean it” not only implies that our tone of voice should *sound* like we mean it, but also that we should *look* like we mean it through our outward movements and gestures. When something does distract us, whether it is a serious matter or simply an inappropriate thought, the proper response is the one taught by the *Shulhan Arukh*: “If a foreign thought should come during prayer, one must pause until that thought is gone. And he must think of things that humble his heart, directing it towards his Father in heaven” (*Orah Hayyim* 98:1).

There are also “holy” distractions that can be detrimental to prayer. What I am referring to are the frequent responses called for in synagogue prayer: answering blessings with “amen” and responding to such prayers as *kaddish*, *kedusha*, *barekhu*, etc. The laws about when to interrupt the prayer you are reciting to participate in those responses are complicated ones, but they are not our concern here. What *is* our concern, simply stated, is that it is hard to have *kavvana* and really mean whatever prayer you are saying if you constantly have to stop to respond to an entirely different prayer. This problem will inevitably become a common one for anyone who always tries to pray “like he means it” because he will continually find himself at a different point than the *sheli’ah tzibbur*.

But *posekim* have addressed this problem (though it is not widely known). The fullest discussion of the issue is by Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, who convincingly shows that “answering” in the middle of saying *Shema* and its blessings, or even during *pesukei de-zimra*, is an *option* but not an *obligation*. This is a basic application of the talmudic rule *ha-osek be mitzva patur min ha-mitzvah* (one who is involved in the performance of one mitzva is exempt from the performance of another mitzva).<sup>21</sup>

Now one might counter that in our case, since one *can* perform the second mitzva (answering *kedusha*, etc.) while not abandoning his performance of the first mitzva (one’s own prayer), he should answer anyways. According to the *tosafot* it is always an obligation to perform the second mitzva too if one can. And according to Ran, *not* to answer would be unethical (even though it is not a formal obligation), because why should one not perform the extra mitzva if he can do it *ke-darko* (“along his way”) while he performs the first mitzva?

However, Rabbi Yosef responds that even according to the *tosafot* and Ran, interrupting one obligatory prayer to respond to another cannot be required. His reasoning is completely in line with the theme of this chapter:

It seems that it is not considered *ke-darko* (“along his way”) to interrupt the reading of *Shema* for *kaddish* or *kedusha*, because this forces

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even *pesukei de-zimra* for us.” *Mishna Berura* (96) referred to this last point approvingly.

21. *Yabia’ Omer*, vol. 5, sec. 13:5–7 (and also the very end of sec. 7). Rabbi Yosef doesn’t mention *pesukei de-zimra* explicitly in this regard, but it is fairly clear that it is also included based on what he writes in 7:5.

him to make the effort to take his mind and his concentration off of reading the Shema and its blessings so that he can instead focus on answering kaddish or kedusha. [He must] remember the place he stopped at so that he can return to it after he answers, and because of this his kavvana is no longer directly focused on one thing.

(The *tosafot* [Moed Katan, end of 8b] make a similar point that we are forbidden "to do mitzvot in bundles" so that one can completely focus on one mitzva [at a time]. This is also the reason we are forbidden "to mix one joyous occasion with another.")

And especially according to what our Master [Rabbi Yosef Karo] wrote in *Kesef Mishneh* (Laws of Shema 2:15) quoting Rabbenu Mano'ah that according to some when one interrupts in the middle of a verse [to answer] this is only if he has finished a complete thought but not in the middle of an idea. . . . [This is because if he interrupts] he will have to occupy his mind by considering whether he is in the middle of an idea or not.<sup>22</sup>

What the last point means is that since the *halakhot* of when one is or isn't allowed to interrupt to say "Amen" and other things are so complicated, even stopping to think about whether to interrupt destroys kavvana in and of itself! So one may not even consider responding "Amen" or other such thing when he is in the middle of a prayer, unless he has just finished a complete thought. Not all halakhic authorities agree with Rabbi Yosef Karo that this is forbidden, but most do agree that such responses are not obligatory when a person is saying a different prayer to God. Since even for "holy" interruptions like *kaddish* and *kedusha* it is not obligatory to ruin your

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22. Ibid., 17:5. Also see *ibid.*, 2:7, according to which a person may begin *Shemoneh Esrei* in advance if he knows he'll take so long that he'll miss *kedusha*. But Rabbi Yosef intimates that it is still just better to start along with the *tzibbur* despite missing *kedusha*.

That same essay (para. 10) cites Rabbi Avraham ben ha-Rambam who tells a person *not* to rush despite concerns about being finished on time to respond to *Modim*. It depends on the person, of course, but seems that even the smallest loss of kavvana is enough reason not to rush (and consequently miss *Modim*). It is better to start earlier than to rush, but even to start earlier is not obligatory because if one actually does miss *kedusha*: "*ein be-kakh klum*" (it is nothing important). It seems to me that Rabbi Avraham ben ha-Rambam would thus reject Hayyei Adam's suggestion to add petitions after the *Amida* so as not to take the chance of missing *kedusha* (above, note 5). If delaying petitions to the end instead of saying them in their relevant blessings will lessen kavvana for those blessings, then R. Avraham would suggest saying them at the expense of *kedusha*.

In 6:16 Rabbi Yosef wrote that if a person is still saying the *Amida* during *kedusha*, he should *not* raise himself as is the custom for *kedusha*. Nor should he even stop his prayer to listen quietly and thereby fulfil his obligation, unless he can hear the entire *kedusha* from the *sheli'ah tzibbur* specifically, and only if the *sheli'ah tzibbur* is himself a Torah scholar who knows he must have the specific intention for those who are just listening to fulfil their obligation. In any other case, there is no reason whatsoever to interrupt the *Amida*, not even to raise himself on his feet.

train of thought and your *kavvana* by responding, and some authorities forbid it in the middle of an idea, it seems best not to do it.

But it would seem that the rule "one who is involved in the performance of one mitzva is exempt from the performance of another mitzva" does not apply to non-obligatory prayers. It only applies to a "mitzva," i.e., an obligatory commandment. Therefore, unlike for *Shema* with its blessings and *pesukei de-zimra*, one should stop during other prayers and respectfully respond to the congregation's prayer.<sup>23</sup> If one finds that he will not be able to meaningfully finish it later because the interruption ruined his *kavvana*, then it is better for him not to say it at all.

Now that we have described many of the problems involved in praying "like we mean it," talking to God at a reasonable pace rather than always attempting to say all of the words, it is worth studying some historical disputes that are directly relevant to this issue. The controversy over repeating the *Amida*, which we will look at first, is a unique test case for the problem of the *quantity* (the number of tefillot we say) and its effect on *kavvana*. We will follow this by surveying the historical problems and polemics concerning the place of music and poetry in *tefilla*, i.e., about how its *quality* and character affect *kavvana*. All of these discussions will have immediate implications for our tefillot today.

### THE CASE OF HAZARAT HA-SHATZ

One rabbi of a community synagogue to whom I suggested that observant Jews be taught *not* to feel compelled to "say everything" they find in the siddur remained unconvinced. After many years as a pulpit rabbi, he said, he does not think if people were told quantity is not a priority during prayer that they would then devote more time or effort saying *Shema* or the *Amida* with *kavvana*. On the contrary, he predicted they would rush through the remaining obligatory prayers just as quickly, thereby cutting out most of the time devoted to *tefilla* and gaining absolutely nothing of value in the process!

This criticism was based on a realistic view of people who came to his synagogue over a period of many years, and I fully agree that the mentality he describes is widespread. But rather than responding to his criticism directly, it will be valuable to examine an actual historical case that tests his point directly. This case uses history, as it were, as a laboratory to determine whether an attempt to reduce the "quantity" of our prayers really leads to improving their quality. Examining this case will clearly show that this rabbi

23. In 7:4, Rabbi Yosef discusses whether the "13 attributes" is a *davar shebi-kedusha*: if it is, then there is a formal obligation to respond to it. He concludes that it is, and therefore "anyone who finds himself at a point where it is permitted to interrupt must stand and say the 13 attributes with the congregation because they are a *davar shebi-kedusha*." The obvious implication is that there is an obligation to stop and respond to any *davar shebi-kedusha* during any prayer that does not involve a halakha forbidding interruptions.

was absolutely correct in his hunch about how people would react upon being told that the *quantity* of recitation is not a major priority in Jewish prayer. But at the same time, this practical realization about human nature will still not be able to justify telling people they should always “say everything” in the siddur.

Our “test case” will be Rambam’s aborted attempt to abolish *hazarat ha-shatz* (the prayer leader’s repetition of the *Amida*) eight centuries ago. It will be crucial to understand both Rambam’s motivations and the strong reasons why his program ultimately failed (posthumously). Afterwards, study of this case will put us in a better position to answer the criticism I described above.

The origin and purpose of *hazarat ha-shatz* are described in the Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah* 32b and 33b). For our purposes, it will be sufficient to quote Rambam’s own clear summary of the topic from the beginning of a letter in Arabic that he wrote in response to a student’s query about *hazarat ha-shatz*:

The actual obligation which it is fitting to follow is the decree of Hazal that everyone should pray silently. There is no difference between the *sheli’ah tzibbur* and any congregant: each person fulfils his own obligation in this way. Afterwards, the *sheli’ah tzibbur* repeats the prayer out loud with *kedusha*, so that a person who does not know how to pray [*mi she-eino baki*] will thereby fulfil his obligation as well. This is the opinion of the *hakhamim* (the majority of the rabbis), and it is the law.

Nor does Rabban Gamliel disagree that this is the decree which should be followed in practice. Rather, Rabban Gamliel disagrees about something else: namely, he thinks that the silent prayer’s purpose is so that the *sheli’ah tzibbur* will [have an opportunity to] review his prayer, and nothing more. And when he (the *sheli’ah tzibbur*) raises his voice to say his repetition out loud—this is when he fulfils his obligation, he and anyone else who wants to rely on his prayer, whether such a person knows the prayers [*baki*] or not. But [Rabban Gamliel’s opinion] is not the law on regular days. Rather, a person who knows how to pray may only fulfil his obligation with his own prayer.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, according to the *hakhamim*, the noble goal of following silent prayer with a repetition out loud is so that people who don’t know the prayers may still pray. Rabban Gamliel goes even further when he claims that the repetition serves anyone who does not pray on his own for *any* reason (even if he knows how).

The goals of *hazarat ha-shatz* are noble, but Rambam witnessed a tragic reality on Shabbatot and holidays when masses of less-educated and less-committed Jews visited synagogues in droves. Later in the same letter he described what he saw in honest detail:

24. Shilat, pp. 565–570 and Blau, no. 258.

When the *sheli'ah tzibbur* prays out loud, anyone who has already fulfilled his obligation and prayed begins to converse or do worthless things, faces away from the ark, or spits and wipes his nose. And when a person who does not know the prayers sees this he will undoubtedly do the same things, thinking that what the *sheli'ah tzibbur* says is not to be relied upon. And the people who do not know how to pray will leave [the synagogue] not having fulfilled their obligations.

Thus, the entire purpose of the *sheli'ah tzibbur* praying, namely to help those who do not know how to pray, is entirely lost.

With a heavy heart, fully knowing that what he must do violated the rabbinic decree, Rambam chose the following approach as a lesser evil (and a smaller violation of the halakha) than the reality he described above:

But if the congregation never says a silent prayer at all, all of them instead praying together with the *sheli'ah tzibbur* including *kedusha*, then everyone who knows the prayer will pray along with him silently, and whoever does not know how to pray will listen. Everyone will bow together with him (i.e., the *sheli'ah tzibbur*), and the entire congregation will face towards the ark with *kavvana*.

[Thus,] everyone will fulfil his obligation, the matter will be conducted in an orderly and proper manner, and the extra length of the repetition will be prevented. [Also] the *hillul Hashem* (desecration of God's name) will be removed, whereby the gentiles say that the Jews spit and wipe their noses and talk during their prayers because they actually witness such things!

Rambam discussed the same topic in a second letter dated 4961 (1200–1201) to a student named Sa'adya in Alexandria. (It seems that the first letter, above, was written just a few years before, and in response to a similar query by the very same person.)<sup>25</sup> In his second letter Rambam clearly states that the elimination of *hazarat ha-shatz* is only meant for the *Musaf* of Shabbatot and holidays "because of the huge number of people." On weekdays, however, "when we pray with just a few people gathered we return to keeping the original order of praying silently and then out loud."

Rambam's evaluation of what he saw was rooted in his basic attitude towards community prayer, an attitude which itself was based firmly on Hazal's rejection of prayer without *kavvana*. He was adamant about two major principles regarding prayer: firstly, that the ultimate value of prayer lies entirely in its quality and not at all in its quantity, and secondly that to pray without quality (i.e., *kavvana*) is to actively sin. As he wrote in a forthright statement that we cited earlier in chapter two, "saying blessings or psalms rushed or quickly is an absolute sin." Here, as we study his views

25. For the identification of the writer see Shilat, p. 565. Rambam's second letter is found in Shilat, pp. 584–587 and Blau, no. 261.

on *hazarat ha-shatz*, it is worth further citing what he wrote in the same passage about quantity versus quality in *public* prayer:

Making additional readings of psalms or prayers before the obligatory prayer, like the prayers of Rabbi Sa'adya [Gaon] of blessed memory or other ethical readings—all of this is very good, and it is desirable because it serves to motivate *kavvana*. As our rabbis of blessed memory said, "The pious people of earlier times used to prepare themselves for an hour and then pray" [*Berakhot* 30b].

Now, this is desirable for an individual or individuals who can do it at home. But in my opinion it is a mistake to do so in the synagogue, because synagogues are for the public. And if there is an old or weak or very busy<sup>26</sup> person who will be kept late for a short while because of the public prayer, he will be hurt by this. In any such matter, by "the public" we mean the weakest among them. One must try to make it easier for them in every possible way, and not to add extra burdens to their service of God.<sup>27</sup>

There is no question but that the views expressed here influenced Rambam's decision about *hazarat ha-shatz*. In his view, not even the formal rabbinic obligation to repeat the *Amida* could be continued if it invariably led the public to actively sinning by disgracing the prayers and God Himself. When Rambam's son Rabbi Abraham mentioned his father's decree he also wrote that the reason behind it was that repeating the *Amida* in a large crowd constitutes "a terrible trap for sin."<sup>28</sup>

The elimination of *hazarat ha-shatz* does seem to have improved people's respect for prayer, at least according to what Rambam and Rabbi Abraham his son claim to have seen in the synagogues under their authority during their own lifetimes. Rabbi Abraham wrote that "this decree was widely observed in Egypt all the days of his [Rambam's] life and after his death, and the obstacle which made the congregation stumble was removed. Not one of the scholars of the generation disagreed with him. . . ."<sup>29</sup>

However, the situation seems to have changed among later generations of Egyptian Jews. More than four centuries after Rambam's death, the custom of most native Egyptian Jews was still to follow his decree not to have a silent *Amida* for the *Musaf* of Shabbat and holidays. But their practice

26. See Shilat, *ibid.*, p. 589 n. 5. The meaning of the Arabic is unclear; Blau translated "a circumcised person" who would not be able to tolerate extra time in the synagogue because of his suffering. Shilat objects that Blau's case is extremely infrequent, and instead prefers to translate "a *mohe!*" who is in a hurry to leave so that he may perform the mitzva. It is not clear how either translation serves as an effective example in the context of Rambam's discussion. I have translated according to the basic sense of Shilat's rendering.

27. Shilat, p. 589.

28. Hebrew translation quoted in *Shu"t Radbaz*, vol. 4 (reprinted Warsaw, 5642), no. 1165.

29. *Ibid.*

aroused fierce opposition by other groups of Jews (these latter seem to have been recent exiles from Spain). The Spanish group correctly and justifiably argued that to say the *Amida* just once out loud was a blatant violation of every authoritative statement to be found in the Talmud, later rabbinic authorities, and kabbalistic works.

Those opposed to Rambam's decree (which by this time should better be called Rambam's custom) addressed their complaint to Rabbi David Ibn Zimra, known as Radbaz (Spain and Israel, c. 1480–1573). Radbaz decided that the time had come for the Jews of Egypt to once again follow the true halakha and repeat the *Amida*. In his responsum he quoted a Hebrew translation for both of Rambam's letters and for Rabbi Abraham's as well. What is most striking about his argument against the Egyptian practice is that he entirely *agrees* with every single point made by both Rambam and Rabbi Abraham. Why, then, does he reject their practical decision? The rejection is based on simply observing the realities of how people prayed in his time:

As far as the argument that the original reason for the decree still exists at least for Shabbatot and holidays when huge crowds are present, and then they should pray only once as the decree stipulates—on the contrary! I testify to what I have seen with my own eyes: when the *sheli'ah tzibbur* has not even finished half the prayer, most of the congregation is done and they have started talking to one another! So the problem returns completely, but we also violate the rule of the gemara and the *posekim* and the masters of the kabbala, having solved nothing with our decree! Because the master [Rambam] of blessed memory specifically decreed that people should pray word for word with the *sheli'ah tzibbur* as he wrote two or three times in his responsa. And since we have solved nothing, let us return to the talmudic rule. Because we ourselves can testify that if he of blessed memory were alive today he would make them return to the talmudic rule, since the purpose of his decree was not fulfilled. And this point is absolutely clear.<sup>30</sup>

The practical upshot of this harsh but realistic statement is clear: shortening *shaharit* and *musaf* really did help prevent disgraceful behavior towards God during *tefilla*, but only for a limited time. As long as it did so, Rambam was justified in suspending a clear talmudic rule to prevent this *hillul Hashem*.

But after time passed (and especially when Rambam and his son were no longer alive to supervise the implementation of their decree) basic human nature came into play once again. People took advantage of the time saved through the elimination of *hazarat ha-shatz* to finish their prayers even earlier so that they could spend more time talking! The *hillul Hashem* returned, and there was no longer a religious value to be gained by suspending the talmudic rule according to Rambam's decree.

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30. Ibid.

Thus, it seems that the rabbi whose criticism I mentioned at the beginning of this discussion was entirely correct. The lesson from Radbaz's experience is that efforts to improve *kavvana* by shortening *tefilla* are likely to fail in reality. No matter how few tefillot are said, people will still tend to rush them. There would seem to be no value in informing people that much of what is found in the siddur is not obligatory and that in general it is better to say less with more *kavvana*. Unfortunately, it is likely that they will take advantage of this fact to drastically shorten the amount of time they spend on *tefilla*, gaining no *kavvana* whatsoever in the process.

But this conclusion errs by missing a crucial point. What of the prohibition against *tirha de-tzibbura* (not burdening the congregation)? According to this rule, it should be *prohibited* to tell a congregation that they must say tefillot which are not obligatory in fact. *Tirha de-tzibbura* cannot be applied against a rabbinic obligation, or course, but what about other time consuming customs? This point requires us to briefly return to Radbaz's responsum:

As far as the argument that it will be a major burden on the community and lengthen the service—these are absolutely foolish words! Because they can [instead] shorten the prayers they say for the dead of the past several generations, which wastes half the time for prayer! [*Rahamanot she-merahimim 'al ha-metim* seems to be a reference to the memorial prayer which we nowadays call *El Male Rahamim* and in which each person who has died is usually mentioned specifically by name.—S.K.] This is an unnecessary practice which has little positive value but causes much loss. This is not the place to discuss this matter, but in any case it is perfectly clear that what we can shorten by [eliminating] this more than makes up for what we add by repeating the *tefilla*.

It is clear, then, that Radbaz actually *supported* making the tefillot shorter in some ways. He did not oppose Rambam's decree because he thought that every customary prayer must always be said, but only because in the case of *hazarat ha-shatz* a serious halakhic obligation was being thwarted by Rambam's decree, and not just a minor custom. But when halakha is not involved, the prohibition of *tirha de-tzibbura* absolutely *must* come into play.

There is yet another point to be considered. Remember that Rambam considers the rushed recitation of any prayer to be "an absolute sin" (falling into the category of disrespect for God). This sort of consideration seems to have led him to his far-reaching decision about *hazarat ha-shatz*, but that is not the only place he applied it. He also applied it to additional voluntary prayers by individuals, to adding extra prayers for the public in the synagogue, and to rushing the obligatory prayers.

As far as the obligatory prayers go, we have also seen that there is no solution beyond doing our best to make sure that they are recited at a reasonable pace. To eliminate some of them because of concerns about *hillul Hashem* only backfires, since people will continue to rush whatever prayers



remain. We thereby violate the rules of Hazal and gain nothing in terms of *kavvana*. Radbaz made this point absolutely clear.

But when it comes to things that are *not* obligatory, it seems that people should definitely be informed of this fact and repeatedly taught that saying less with *kavvana* is better than a lot without it. The reason is very simple: to rush through to say them all is in itself a sin with no practical gain, while skipping them violates nothing (because they are not obligatory). Thus, even if many people who are told that much of the siddur is not obligatory will take advantage of the fact by simply finishing early without any gain in terms of *kavvana*, that is still the lesser of two evils. The fact that many people will simply spend less time praying is not too high a price to pay for giving others the opportunity to pray at a reasonable pace and with *kavvana*. In conclusion, the practical realization about human nature by the synagogue rabbi is entirely correct, but I question his value judgement on this matter. Even if people will often behave as he correctly claims they will, they should still be informed about what is obligatory and what is not, and that less with *kavvana* is almost always to be preferred over more without it.

Finally, there is hope. Perhaps the attitude of rushing through page after page of the siddur cannot be eliminated for all Jews by educating them that they should say less but with more *kavvana*. But some individuals and even entire communities can change. When he justified returning to the talmudic rule about *hazarat ha-shatz*, Radbaz wrote:

The best reason of all is that now there is widespread Torah study in Egypt, which was not true before. Almost all of them are Torah scholars and they all listen silently during the repetition of the prayer, answering "Amen" after each blessing. If there are some who talk about unimportant matters they are an insignificant minority, and uneducated people will learn not from them but from the Torah scholars instead.

Education and sincere efforts *can* make a difference, despite widespread skepticism. I have personally seen its positive results in the behavior of many individuals and in certain select communities. Radbaz referred to *hazarat ha-shatz* in this positive comment, of course, but sincere people can train themselves regarding non-obligatory parts of prayer as well. There actually are many people, even if they are a minority, who would pray more slowly and with more *kavvana* if they were taught that this was an acceptable alternative to always saying everything in the siddur. A significant minority would not take advantage of the fact by rushing through even less and leaving the synagogue earlier. There is no reason why sincere people (and they do exist) should be prevented from being able to say fewer prayers "like they mean them" because of others who will always rush through all of *tefilla*, whether it is long or short.

In conclusion, the pulpit rabbi's skeptical view of human nature is validated entirely by the history of Rambam's decree on *hazarat ha-shatz*. But despite its validity, people still should be educated to only pray "like

they mean it," even if this means that they will often skip non-obligatory parts of the siddur.

### MUSIC AND POETRY IN PRAYER: POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE FACTORS

Singing is an important tool to help people better identify with the words that they say. It is also a way to provide an element of *hiddush* to fixed prayer texts: even though the words do not change, a good melody can restore vitality to an "old" prayer. But the tunes that are used during *tefilla* be-tzibbur should be chosen based on one criterion only: Do these tunes help people better mean what they say to God? The best melodies capture the mood of the words. A tune chosen for *Kedusha* should inspire awe, while a melody for *Leha Dodi* should be joyous. A well-chosen tune also fits the words so that they can be pronounced correctly, with pauses at the proper points. Unfortunately, many melodies jumble sentences insensibly and force words to be so badly mispronounced that it seems like the people singing have no idea what they mean.<sup>31</sup>

Melodies help make active participation in *tefilla* more enjoyable. This fact alone helps people to better mean what they say (or sing), and is the best reason to include singing in *tefilla*. It is also why such singing should almost always involve the community, not just the *hazzan* singing solo. (For *piyyutim*, it is common for the *hazzan* to sing or chant each stanza only after the community recites it. But even this often becomes boring very quickly.) If public prayer is truly the community's conversation with God, then the members of the community must participate in that conversation, even when it includes music.

But beyond its potential to "bring home" the emotional texture of the prayers and keep their message fresh, music also plays a special role by relating prayers to their context in time. In Yiddish, the word *nusach* became the label for this beautiful phenomenon, though we've seen that it has a different connotation in Hebrew. In Yiddish, *nusach* means a simple patterned melody that is meant only for one particular kind of occasion. There is one *nusach* for weekdays, one for *Kabbalat Shabbat* on Friday night, one for Shabbat morning, and one for Shabbat afternoon *Minha*. There is a

31. See *Iggerot Moshe* (Orah Hayyim 2:22) on *hazzanim* whose melodies force them to distort the prayers by rearranging their words. The results are often nonsensical, and in such cases he writes that they may not fulfil their halakhic obligation.

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef wrote the most comprehensive discussion of how *hazzanut* so often renders prayers nonsensical, as well as lengthening them greatly and causing terrible *tirha de-tzibbura*. He cited most of the important sources on this issue. See *Yabia Omer*, vol. 6, 7:4–6 and also consult Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael*, vol. 4, pp. 33–38 on the effect of *hazzanut* on the text of the siddur.

Rabbi Yosef also showed that it is permissible to adapt non-Jewish music for use in Jewish prayer whenever appropriate: see *ibid.*, 7:1–3.

separate *nusach* for holidays (Pesah, Shavout, and Sukkot), and a special one for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Each special time has its own musical flavor.

Jonathan Zimet, who has devoted himself to spreading the knowledge of *nusach*, described its main purpose:

Consistently associating a certain melody pattern with a certain occasion gives rise to experiential associations much as other sights, sounds and smells will bring back to someone a flood of specific memories and rich emotional connotations and associations. Prayer is not just a cognitive, intellectual experience (engaging only the “left” hemispheres of our brains). At its best prayer is a fully engaging process that involves feelings and levels of communication and understanding that we often now call “right hemispheric.” Hearing certain modes that become associated with certain moods helps evoke these moods and settings in ways that labels and concepts alone cannot. Thus, for example, a pattern one regularly hears at Kabbalat Shabbat will become associated with one’s other feelings of that occasion—such as a feeling of onset of peace after the Friday afternoon rush, or the late afternoon sun, or the smell of the air or of a certain food. Hearing a different melody at Shabbat Mincha—shortly before the Shabbat is to end—may bring a different set of emotions, associated perhaps with the slightly bitter-sweet feeling that “Shabbat is almost over; can’t it stay longer,” or perhaps a deeper serenity and an effort to savor each remaining minute more fully. Similarly, saying a prayer on Shabbat with a special melody different from the weekday version brings the listener the experiential, non-intellectual realization that it is Shabbat, with all its associations, and similarly when a distinct melody is used for the same prayer on a holiday.<sup>32</sup>

From the point of view of “rote versus meaning” in prayer, *nusach* (in its Yiddish connotation) is an excellent use of music. It accomplishes the task that Zimet describes for it admirably, but it does not detract in any way from the idea of prayer being a conversation with God. Musical *nusach* is extremely flexible: it is easily made to adapt to the literal meaning and emotional content of the prayers (i.e., the prayers can be made to *sound* like what they *mean*), it adapts to textual variations without any trouble, and it can usually accommodate the wide range of emotions expressed in the texts of the prayers, whether sadness or joy, fear or gratitude. Most importantly, basic *nusach* is extremely easy to learn. Any Jew who prays with a community regularly picks it up almost automatically. This means that the musical aspect of prayer, rather than becoming a musical “performance” by the *hazzan*, can be incorporated into the prayers of congregants as they talk to God.

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32. Jonathan Zimet, *Nusach—Reclaiming a Lost Heritage* (Highland Park, NJ: published privately, 1995), pp. 2–3.

Even granting the value of song and *nusach*, however, there is an essential distinction to keep in mind: True *tefilla be-tzibbur* is not mainly achieved by singing prayers word for word *with* the community, but by praying *for* the community. In chapter four we learned that in *tefilla be-tzibbur*, a Jew subsumes his own concerns among the needs of the entire Jewish people. He prays along with other Jews for “us” rather than for “me.” As Uriel Simon pointed out (see chapter one), the plural language of our tefillot is meant to make the individual identify with the needs of others, of the entire community, and to pray for them with all his heart and soul. Simon emphasized that while it is good to encourage joint participation through enjoyable tunes, the primary goal must still be to help people identify with the *content* of what they are singing, especially with the plural language of the prayers. The melodies must not be allowed to become an end in and of themselves.

Professional *hazzanut* was meant to beautify the tefillot, in the spirit of *zeli Keli ve-anvehu* [“This is my God, and I will glorify Him!”]. It tried to accomplish this through difficult and intricate elaborations by the *hazzan* against the background mode of the traditional *nusach*. But these performances, unfortunately, often failed to make the tefillot inspiring for the masses of people who prayed. Instead, they became bored. This is partly because *hazzanut* very often lengthened the prayers enormously, and (as we discussed above) length is detrimental to *kavvana* as a general rule. But more significantly, listening to *hazzanut* was usually a passive activity for most people in the synagogue; at most points, the *hazzan* did not invite the community to sing along with him. Furthermore, even those who appreciated *hazzanut* were often moved by the *hazzan's* soaring musical artistry (European Ashkenazic *hazzanut*, after all, shares roots with opera!) but not at all inspired by the *content* of the liturgy he chanted. It was a rare *hazzan* who helped people better mean the words they actually said in their prayers. On the contrary, when listening to *hazzanut* it is too often easy to tell that the musical elaboration has little or no connection with the meaning of the words. (The most striking example possible of complete and utter dissonance between the music of *hazzanut* and the actual meaning of a prayer's words is in the traditional Ashkenazic music for *Kol Nidrei*.) In classical *hazzanut*, the ideal of beautifying the prayers was often taken so seriously that musical appreciation replaced simple *kavvana* for much of the community.

In this context it is worth calling special attention to an oft-ignored statement in the *Shulhan Arukh* that makes it clear that while a musical voice can fulfil an important Torah value in *tefilla*, it can be a pitfall for true prayer as well:

When a *sheli'ah tzibbur* lengthens his prayer so that the congregation can hear his pleasant voice, if he does so because his heart is glad that he has merited to give joyous song and thanks to God through his beautiful voice, then he will be blessed. This is provided he prays seriously, standing [before God] with fear and awe.

But if his intention is for the people to hear his voice so that they will praise him, and he takes great pride in his voice, then it is

disgusting. About him it is said, "She raised her voice against Me—therefore have I rejected her" (Jeremiah 12:8). In any case, whoever lengthens his prayer too much is doing something which is not good, because he burdens the congregation [*mippenei torah ha-tzibbur*].<sup>33</sup>

Music, then, can be a powerful tool for helping people make their *tefilla* a true conversation with God. It has to be applied carefully, however, and should be continually re-examined to make sure that it is helping people mean their tefillot in the best possible way.

Note that the essential point in the passage above is regarding *length*. Length is, indeed, the chief problem with all musical prayer and with classical *hazzanut* specifically. And *tirha de-tzibbura* is a serious halakhic prohibition that may not be carelessly overlooked. Some people have objected to me that it is only the present generation that feels that *hazzanut* adds boring length to *tefilla*, and claim that in earlier times when it was better appreciated it was also better loved (and people minded the extra length less). The *Shulhan Arukh*'s point about *hazzanim* who "lengthen their prayers too much" should put the idea that this is only a contemporary problem to rest. On the contrary, *hazzanim* have been "doing something which is not good" by "burdening congregations" for centuries!

Nevertheless, the *Shulhan Arukh* also makes it clear that extra length can sometimes be justified: the only relevant criterion are the sincere intentions of the *hazzan* and the honest desire of congregants for well-done musical additions. A careful balance must be maintained between a true desire to glorify God through music and the need not to burden the community. As always, the consideration must be whether any musical addition helps or hinders congregants from making their prayers a real conversation with God.

A similar thing is true of the many *piyyutim* (liturgical poems) that have been a part of our prayers for numerous centuries: they were all composed for no other reason than to add meaning to the experience of prayer. In fact, for well over a thousand years *piyyut* has been the major form of innovative expression in the words of our prayers. But unfortunately, since they were incomprehensible to most Jews, *piyyutim* were also viewed by many as an extra burden added on to the already lengthy tefillot. Since congregational prayer is mostly meant for the *tzibbur*, relevance to the masses should have been the primary concern, rather than the preferences of "connoisseurs" who appreciated religious poetry (or *hazzanut*, for that matter).

In medieval times, there was widespread debate about whether adding *piyyutim* to the prayers was desirable from an halakhic point of view. Those

33. *Orah Hayyim* 53:11.

For the idea that it is a mitzva to use the gift of a beautiful voice in God's honor, see the midrashim and Rashi on Proverbs 3:9, "Honor the Lord with your wealth." The midrash suggests reading *me-honekha*, "from what He has given you," such as a pleasant voice to listen to: "If your voice is pleasant and you are standing in the synagogue—rise and honor God through your voice!" This is cited in *Biur ha-Gra* (ibid).

who justified *piyyutim* did so based on the talmudic sources allowing change in the words of the prayers. At the same time, those who opposed *piyyutim* forbade their recitation based on the conviction that it wasn't permissible to change the "official" texts of the blessings. All of this was explained in chapter four.

However, the major objection to *piyyut* during tefillah throughout history was *not* that it is halakhically forbidden. Rather, the objection was that even if reciting a *piyyut* during prayer is halakhically *permissible*, it is not usually *desirable* to do so. Rambam, for instance, objected to reciting *piyyutim* on halakhic grounds, because they alter the official text. But he also noted that *piyyutim* "are the major reason for the lack of *kavvana*, and for the masses to be lax about talking during prayer, since they correctly sense that these things are not obligatory."<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Rabbenu Asher (Rosh) discouraged the recitation of *piyyutim* even though he did *not* share Rambam's halakhic objection to them. On the contrary, Rosh placed extraordinary emphasis on

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34. *Teshuvot ha-Rambam*, vol. 2, no. 254 (pp. 465–468). For other polemics against *piyyut* by Rambam (some of them very sharply worded), see responsa nos. 180 (pp. 328–329), 207 (pp. 365–366), 208 (pp. 366–370), 260 (pp. 487–489); *Perush ha-Mishnayot to Sanhedrin* 10:1 (p. 141a in Kafih ed.); introduction to *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* (2b in the standard Vilna edition); *Moreh ha-Nevukhim* 1:59.

In the above sources, Rambam mentions several different objections to *piyyutim*. The first and most frequent charge is that the recitation of *piyyutim* violates the rabbinic ban on changing the text (*matbea'*) of the blessings (cf. Rambam's view on changing the *matbea'* of blessings in *Hilkhot Berakhot* 1:6, which we studied at length in chapter five). Secondly, Rambam also mentions that such recitations constituted an unnecessary burden on the congregation. Both of these criticisms are prominent in no. 254.

Thirdly, Rambam claims that the often morbid themes in *piyyutim* are inappropriate for the Sabbath and holidays: "Just as *tefilla* is a very important service [of God], so too is keeping His commandment to honor the days that He honors, treating them in the way that He has decided—this is the greatest worship! And this means that Sabbaths must be for rest, and holidays for joy, but never to make them days of fasting and crying and pleading, and never to recite things during them which are appropriate for such [sad] occasions" (no. 208).

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Rambam considered the authors of many *piyyutim* to have been just poets, but not true Torah scholars. Because of this he accused them of introducing ideas that are theologically incorrect and often border on blasphemy. He makes this point very strongly in *Moreh Ha-Nevukhim* (1:59), and mentions it as well in his preface to *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* and in his responsa (e.g., no. 254).

Rambam's views on poetry in general were negative, and this strengthened his opposition to *piyyut* as a part of prayer. Rambam summarized his views on the value of language and its proper uses in his commentary to *Avot* 1:16 (on Rabban Shim'on ben Gamliel's lesson that "All my life I was raised among the wise, and I have found nothing better for a person than silence." Kafih ed., vol. 2, pp. 272–274). In his view, both speech and literature are to be judged based on their content and their clarity; using language as a vehicle to show off cleverness and sophistication—as he accuses the *payyetanim* of doing—is not part of the behavior of a true servant of God. It is only the content that matters, and the content of poems—as in any other use of language—must be respectable and theologically correct. A poem in Arabic whose

the importance of reciting *piyyutim* during prayer in *principle*, but he was led to discourage reading them in *practice* because in them people find “an excuse to interrupt [prayer] with idle talk about useless matters.”<sup>35</sup> How true these sentiments remain today!

The objections to *piyyut* by Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1164) are the best known. In his lengthy comment on *Kohelet* 5:1 (“Keep your mouth from being rash, and let not your heart be quick to bring forth speech before God”), he frowns upon popular *piyyutim*. His basic objection is that

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content is “kosher” is better than a poem in perfect Hebrew whose content is profane or blasphemous.

Rambam also denigrated poetry (in passing) in *Moreh Ha-Nevukhim* 1:2, where he deems poetry to be frivolous reading and contrasts it to Torah study. Similarly, in his introduction to *Perek Helek* (on the word *Apikoros*; Kafih, pp. 140–141) he denigrates Ben-Sira and compares his writings to “the books among the Arabs of history stories and the behavior of kings, and the family histories of the Arabs, and books of verse, and other similar examples of those books which contain no wisdom and no physical benefit, but are only a waste of time.” (My emphasis.)

It is clear that Rambam himself had the talent to compose Hebrew verses in rhyme because he introduced some of his letters in this way (most prominently *Iggeret Teiman* [Shilat, vol. 1, pp. 82–83]). But in a letter to Rabbi Yehonatan Hakohen of Lunil, which he began in rhyming verse, he immediately apologizes that he only did so because such was the custom of the Jews in his native Spain and not because he had any love for “the ways of poets.” Then he turns to the reader (almost with relief) and tells him that he will now address his queries in a straightforward manner. (No more “beating around the bush”!)

For other discussions of Rambam’s views on poetry see Twersky, chap. 4 n. 29, and especially Blidstein, pp. 123–150.

Rambam’s son, Rabbi Abraham, mentions the campaign that he and his father waged against the recitation of *piyyutim* in Egypt. Rabbi Abraham’s comments were printed with a Hebrew translation printed alongside the original Arabic by Shimon Eppenstein, in *Israel-Lewy-Festschrift* [= *Sefer ha-Yovel Tiferet Yisrael Halevi*] (Breslau, 1911), p. 49 (Hebrew section). However, Eppenstein’s translation is faulty and partially unintelligible; it is corrected by Yitzhak Shilat in his edition of *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, vol. 2, p. 579 n. 1.

The earliest recorded objections to *piyyut* are from geonic times, about the year 800; see the discussion in Hoffman, pp. 66–71 and for the primary source see Ginzburg, *Ginzei Schechter*, vol. 2, p. 546. (Specifically, the objection was to adding *piyyutim* during the first three blessings of the *Amida*. For the halakhot relating to this, see *Orah Hayyim* 112.) On the opposition to *piyyut*, also see Elbogen’s survey (pp. 224–228) of the various objections that were raised from the earliest times until the eighteenth century. His conclusion is quoted below in this chapter.

35. Quoted by his son in *Tur* 68 (end). It is absolutely clear that Rosh did not oppose the recitation of *piyyutim* during prayer in principle; in fact, he gives unstinting praise to *piyyutim* and strongly urges their recitation near the end of his commentary to the third chapter of *Berakhot*. The negative remark quoted here seems to have been made orally to his son, the author of the *Tur*, but nothing like it appears anywhere else in Rosh’s writings. Apparently Rosh wanted to preserve the recitation of *piyyutim*, but at some point he realized that they were no longer fulfilling their purpose because of people’s inability to concentrate on them (based on *Bah*, *Orah Hayyim* 68).

something one does not understand is not appropriate for prayer. *Piyyutim*, in general, are notoriously difficult to understand; Ibn Ezra objects to reciting any *piyyut* for which this is true.

For Ibn Ezra, the ideal would be for man to praise and thank God constantly. Since this is impossible, specific times were set aside for prayer during which a man “must guard his mouth, realizing that he stands before the King in whose hand lies the power of life and death. Therefore, it is forbidden for a person to insert *piyyutim* into his prayer if he does not fully know what they mean.” In other words, a man bears full responsibility for what he says to God in prayer. Therefore, if he isn’t sure what he is reciting he surely must not say it!

Furthermore, declares Ibn Ezra, one should not rely on the scholarship and good intentions of the author of a *piyyut*, assuming that whatever the *payyetan* (poet) composed is surely appropriate for prayer! Almost tongue-in-cheek, Ibn Ezra reminds us that all men commit errors and sins at times, even the authors of liturgical poetry. And even if the poem itself was “kosher” when it was first written down by a God-fearing scholar, the scribes who copy such compositions often let serious mistakes creep into the texts. Ibn Ezra thus concludes that it is never worth the risk to address God using words that one does not understand.

Ibn Ezra’s fear that many *piyyutim* are somehow inappropriate to prayer is backed up by four specific objections to them:

- (1) The expressions in these poems are mostly based on subtle hints and obscure analogies, making them impossible to understand without tedious study. Is this how one is supposed to talk to God?! When great men in the Bible such as Daniel prayed, their meaning was evident and plain.
- (2) While the poems are nominally in Hebrew, they frequently employ elements from other tongues, especially Aramaic. Hazal composed the fixed prayers using a simple but elegant Hebrew vocabulary, and their compositions provide a better model than most *piyyutim*.
- (3) Many popular *piyyutim* contain severe errors in the use of the Hebrew language. Their phraseologies are often based on wrong interpretations of biblical texts, and they abuse the rules of biblical Hebrew grammar.
- (4) The biblical references in the poems are often based on midrashim. In prayers based on the Bible, however, we should only focus on what is clear and understandable in the biblical text.

In short: obscure riddles, foreign vocabulary, grammatical absurdities and fantastic midrashim—none of these should be part of prayer.<sup>36</sup> Ibn Ezra’s overriding objection that people find the *piyyutim* incomprehensible holds

36. Note that in this context Ibn Ezra’s objections are specifically aimed at the liturgical creations of Kalir, though criticisms of this sort could have been levelled against many of the great *payyetanim*. It has been suggested that Ibn Ezra found



true today as well. Even with a well-written translation or commentary, only the barest outline of the surface meaning of these poems becomes evident to the average pray-er, and even that is only achieved with considerable effort. Moreover, so many of these poems are recited (especially during *selihot* and on Yom Kippur) that it becomes impossible to analyze any of them seriously, let alone to recite them with feeling. It follows that today, as for the Rambam and Ibn Ezra, reciting *piyyutim* is usually not a form of conversation with God for most people.

However, it is important to remember that objections to the use of *piyyut* during prayer have been voiced for at least a thousand years.<sup>37</sup> If that is so, then why did the *piyyutim* only succeed in becoming ever more popular?

In order to address this question, is important to note that not all of Ibn Ezra's objections need be accepted at face value. Both Ibn Ezra and Rambam held very static views on the nature of language. What Ibn Ezra saw as faulty grammar and misinterpretation, or what Rambam viewed as the bastardization of languages when their elements are mixed,<sup>38</sup> might be viewed quite differently by a *payyetan* or by a historian of the Hebrew language. They might view language as something that develops fluidly, without absolute rules to define its purity. Moreover, the contribution of the *payyetanim* to the development of Hebrew was precisely in that they created new forms and styles that added to the richness of the language. Far from being mere "mistakes," these original usages were often conscious innovations that added new flavor to the Hebrew language.

Creativity, innovation, original expressions, and complex imagery—these were all means of expressing devotion to God in new and beautiful ways. More than anything else it was deep religious fervor—the love and fear of God—that continually motivated *payyetanim* to compose new poetry. Others who appreciated their work found that they added a richness to prayer that was previously absent. Despite objections to *piyyut* that began when the talmudic age had ended, neither the poets themselves nor those who appreciated their work could be dissuaded by claims that their creations lacked the linguistic "purity" of older prayers, or that they weren't appreciated by the common people.

Over four centuries after Ibn Ezra's death, a defender of *piyyut* published the clearest, most direct refutation possible to his criticisms. Rabbi Yehuda Leow, best known as the "Maharal" of Prague in Czechoslovakia and the subject of numerous legends (1526–1609), wrote that one cannot expect the same sort of clarity and "purity" of expression in songs and poems as one finds in prose prayers because of their very nature:

Rabbi Abraham ben Ezra of blessed memory attacked the language of

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himself competing financially with Kalir's popular poems! (On Ibn Ezra's poetry see Elbogen, p. 264, and note on p. 265.)

37. Hoffman, *ibid.*

38. See *Hilkhot Tefilla* 1:4–6. Rambam's insistence on the use of "pure" Hebrew for prayer was discussed in chapter nine.

all the *payyetanim* whenever they do not conform to the rules of grammar, when he elaborated on this subject in his commentary to *Kohelet*. But I say that our rabbis of blessed memory did not care about such exactness in language. Certainly the Bible is written in the holy tongue, and in its language, which is the holy language, one may not deviate from its grammar for even one vowel. And whenever there is something which is unusual linguistically, it is so that some lesson [*derasha*] can be learned from it. And similarly in prayer, about which [the rabbis] of blessed memory said: "Any person who asks for his needs in Aramaic will not be attended to by the angels, because the angels do not understand Aramaic" (*Shabbat* 12a), in this matter they certainly followed the laws of language and grammar.

But regarding *piyyut*, which is like song and praise that a man says in his own language, they did not mind saying a thing even if it is not exactly according to the rules of the language, as long as its meaning is understandable. For all languages are proper for this [purpose, i.e., songs and praises], and they were not exacting about any form of speech which makes sense. . . .

Now you must see that even though the praises in the Torah do not contain changes in the rules of grammar, there is still definitely a difference. Because the songs in the Torah are not as understandable like the [prose] prayers are; rather, the songs are not so readily understandable. This is because songs must be said with joy and a happy heart—that is why they are called "songs," because songs come from joy. Now prayer is with great humility, for one stands with fear and awe, but whoever is happy says things which are exaggerated (when the heart of the person saying them is open he exaggerates the matter) and when he exaggerates his praise that is also why the language is not readily understandable . . . for he is not saying things the way people normally speak.<sup>39</sup>

There is no clear way to "translate" profound feelings of joy (or suffering either, as Maharal points out later) into ordinary language ("the way people normally speak"). Indeed, this is the basic motivation behind all poetry. As Maharal realized, this fact also accounts for the striking differences between biblical poetry and biblical prose. When we express our joy to God we cannot be confined to rigid forms of expression and grammatical technicalities, claims Maharal, and Hazal never expected us to do so in the first place. We must conclude that poetry, despite its frequent obscurities, can be an essential part of a profoundly religious personality.

In fact, it seems that even Ibn Ezra himself was unable to escape this conclusion! He himself praised the *piyyutim* that Rav Saadya Gaon wrote (noting that the gaon avoided linguistic blunders in whatever he composed). Because of this, as well as the fact that Ibn Ezra himself composed numerous *piyyutim*, one would imagine that even he wasn't entirely

39. *Netivot 'Olam, Netiv ha-'Avodah*, chap. 12 (end).

opposed to liturgical poetry. As long as the poems kept to the style of biblical usage, and were not obscure and hard to understand (in his own judgement, at least!), he had no objection to them. Cultured men and scholars such as himself must have found great satisfaction expressing their religious feelings and longings through the medium of intricate poetry. This seems to be the main reason why *piyyut* continually triumphed over its critics.<sup>40</sup>

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40. But there were other important reasons as well. The standing of *piyyut* was greatly enhanced because by the Middle Ages it was already an old and respected tradition. This fact led several *rishonim* to report that the ancient *payyetanim* were extraordinary men whose lives were filled with miracles, and that they wrote their poems under supernatural circumstances. See Rabbenu Tam as quoted in Rosh at the end of the third chapter of *Berakhot*, in *Shibbolei ha-Leket* (68), and in *Mahzor Vitry*, ed. Hurwitz (Nuremberg: Makitzei Nirdanim, 1923), p. 364; these and similar admonitions are cited in Y. Weingarten, *Seder ha-Selikhos ha-Meforash* (Jerusalem: Hagefen, 1984), p. 20, and in Abraham Isaac Sperling, *Ta'amei ha-Minhagim* (reprinted Jerusalem: Eshkol, 1982), pp. 247–248. Weingarten's introduction and preface (pp. 3–32) are a fine practical introduction to *piyyut* and *selikhot* from the perspective of those who idealize them.

It must be stated, however, that even strong sentiments like those of Rabbenu Tam were not always enough to justify *piyyut* in a practical sense. Rosh, though he recorded and accepted Rabbenu Tam's "supernatural" view of the *piyyutim*, concluded that they should be avoided since people do not treat them with respect and say them with *kavvana* (see note 35 above).

The institution of *piyyut* was also strengthened by the simple fact that there is always a general avoidance of changing customs, even when there is no halakhic ruling involved. This basic attitude helped preserve the venerable custom of *piyyut*: some authorities condemned not only those who omitted them entirely in the name of "not abandoning customs," but even those who changed just the selection and order of *piyyutim*. Those who objected to changing the *piyyut* customs often added supernatural factors as well: unexpected deaths were blamed on those who changed them. See *Sefer Hasidim* (607) and *Maharil* (*Hilkhot Yom Kippur*), as well as *Rema* (*Orah Hayyim* 619). Most of these sources are collected and quoted in Weingarten, pp. 20–21, but also see the strange story about the murder of Rabbi Shelomo Alkabetz, cited in *Ta'amei ha-Minhagim*, pp. 247–248.

The status of *piyyut* was reinforced by kabbalists and hasidim as well. Kabbala idealized the texts of certain *piyyutim* in exactly the same way it did for the regular obligatory prayers (see chapters five and eight). *Piyyutim*, just like the rabbinic blessings, could be interpreted according to kabbalistic *kavvanot* and seen as having effects on the universes of the *sefirot* when uttered (see *Magen Avraham* on *Orah Hayyim* 68). This caused one great hasidic leader, the Admor of Munkatch, to reject the routine "human" explanation of why *piyyutim* are often so hard to understand: because their authors forced words into a rigid poetic meter. Instead, he wrote that poetry cannot possibly be the reason, since the authors were great masters of the kabbala and every letter of what they wrote has deep kabbalistic meanings (*Divrei Torah* 9:51, quoted in Weingarten's note on p. 3). This, of course, does not explain why the regular prayers, which supposedly represent similar *kavvanot*, are simple to read according to their literal meaning. But according to this theory, surface meaning has no relevance anyway.

Among Lurianic kabbalists, there was a tendency to hallow ancient *piyyutim*

Ismar Elbogen, the historian of Jewish prayer, surveyed the many objections that were raised against *piyyut* by members of the rabbinic elite from its earliest times until the eighteenth century, as opposed to its great popular appeal. In general, he concluded that the following description was true:

. . . the *piyyut* spread very rapidly; it became so beloved by the people that its importance sometimes overshadowed the regular fixed prayers. Because of this it might seem to make sense to assume that it was favored at all times, and that from the beginning the chief

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written by men thought to have been experts in the "secret" Torah (specifically Rabbi Eliezer ha-Kalir), but to minimize the value of *piyyutim* written by medieval rationalists who were not kabbalists (such as Rabbi Yehuda Halevi and Ibn Ezra). Interestingly, one halakhist held exactly the reverse view: Maharshdam (Responsa, *Orah Hayyim* 35) wrote that the *piyyutim* of the Spanish poets are preferable to Kalir's (which are used in the Ashkenazic custom) because the former are clear and understandable while for the latter: "Their absence is better than their presence, especially today when it is impossible to find even one man in an entire city who truly understands what he says." For numerous citations of authorities who discussed the relative merits of Ashkenazic and Sephardic collections of *piyyut*, see *Yabia Omer*, vol. 6, 10:2.

One final comment on the sanctity granted to *piyyut* by the kabbala: the hasidic leader Rabbi Pinhas of Koretz was bothered by the fact that Ibn Ezra rejected the *piyyutim* of Kalir. To solve the problem he adapted a kabbalistic version of the idea that the generations have different "levels." He wrote that the sages of the Talmud could "see" the truth better because they were still not far removed from Temple times. And the later generations also have more "light" because they are closer to Messianic times. But the "middle" generations, including Ibn Ezra's, were dark times, and therefore they did not appreciate the kabbalistic greatness of Kalir. In this way, Ibn Ezra's comments can be "excused." See *Midrash Pinhas* (Warsaw, 1876), p. 55; cited in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Torah min ha-Shamayim be-Aspaklarya shel ha-Dorot*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: JTS, 1990), pp. 145–146. For a superb critique of the idea that the spiritual capacity of each generation inevitably falls ("The Degeneration of the Generations") see Norman Lamm, *Torah Umadda* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1990) pp. 86–103. This concept is very important because it has had a tremendous ideological impact on the yeshiva world and on all of Orthodox Judaism in modern times. Rabbi Lamm's critique is, to the best of my knowledge, the only essay on the topic that addresses it with sensitivity, but is at the same time critical and thorough. Another good collection of sources on the same topic is found in Heschel, *ibid.*, pp. 139–149.

When reading comments like the ones in this note which idealize *piyyut* for supernatural or kabbalistic reasons, it is easy to lose sight of one very simple but nevertheless crucial point. As a practical conclusion, consider that even granting the validity of the arguments by those who champion *piyyut* (whether because of objections to changing custom or because of mystical views about the authors of *piyyut* and their texts), these arguments do not seem to be of equal weight compared to the transgressions of talking to God without *kavvana* and *tirha de-tzibura*. Should we not be just as concerned (if not more) about the judgement of heaven regarding these latter problems, whose severity is clearly stated in the Talmud and by the *posekim*?

religious spokesmen supported it. But this not so; on the contrary, the *piyyut* was destined confront a thousand obstacles, and in almost every generation it was the great leaders themselves who opposed it with great vehemence. But their influence was not enough to thwart it, because the masses supported it.<sup>41</sup>

It seems that the *piyyutim* drew their support not from the uneducated masses (who usually could not understand them), nor from the rabbinic elite (who, like Rambam, sometimes opposed them), but from the "middle class" of educated, cultured Jews who loved poetry but were not necessarily also Torah scholars. When the poems were combined with music this added to their appeal, even for less educated Jews.<sup>42</sup>

For many, poetry is the answer to a creative urge that belongs to the deepest part of their human essence. *Piyyut* served that purpose in its various forms, and for this reason it could never be entirely expunged from the prayers, despite the desire by many authorities to do so. Ultimately, *piyyut* cannot be eliminated because it derives from a true Torah value, that of expressing religious feelings in new and beautiful ways: "Zeh keli ve-anvehu! This is my God and I will glorify Him!"

However, to conclude that *piyyut* fulfils a Torah value does not mean that the objections to it, both medieval and modern,<sup>43</sup> are without foundation.

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41. Elbogen, p. 226.

42. *Sefer Hasidim* (254) noted that average Jews in his time did not rush the *piyyutim* because they were sung to a melody. It recommended that they do the same for the biblical verses in between as well, instead of rushing the verses and treating them as an unpleasant burden. Also see the three *posekim* quoted in Weingarten, p. 13, who refer to *Sefer Hasidim* or make similar remarks. The fact that so many *posekim* were forced to respond to the problem of rushing parts of *selihot* indicates that it was always prevalent.

43. For a critique of *piyyut* by an Orthodox community leader in modern times, see Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's comments in *Horeb*, pp. 519–521. When I first read this piece I thought that he was simply responding to men of his own century who wanted to eliminate some or all of the *piyyutim*; but further review convinced me that Hirsch himself was troubled by them because of his position as a rabbi and teacher.

In Hirsch's view, for the masses of Jews to fully comprehend the significance of any special day required "the living word" of the community's scholars and teachers as a supplement to prayer and the reading of the Torah. But "when times became worse and Jews were scattered into smaller groups, this supplement to and building up of ideas given by the *Chachamim* had to be fixed for, and presented to, him that strove for inward Divine worship in its completed form. From this need, the *piyyutim* arose. These are little more than a more complete development of the significance of the day and the life-thoughts flowing therefrom." For Hirsch, therefore, even the original need for *piyyutim* was in itself an unfortunate concession to reality. It would be better if "the living word" of scholars and teachers could continue to serve their purpose instead.

Hirsch continues by pointing out the obvious: the *piyyutim* do not speak to the Jews of our times. But this is not because of any inherent fault in them; rather, it is

As with so many areas in Judaism, here we are faced by a tension between two conflicting values, each of which is true in its own right: the desire to express religious feelings in sublime and complex ways by those who are able to do so, versus the needs of most others to communicate with God through language that they can understand, and not to be burdened by obscurities.

All of this was true during the Middle Ages, but in our day the issue is even more problematic. Elbogen wrote that *piyyut* overcame all objections because it was "beloved by the people." But in our day, most observant Jews feel little or no attachment to the vast majority of the *piyyutim*. Some especially-moving ones retain their meaning, such as *Le-Kel 'Orekh Din, Ki Hinneh ka-Homer*, and *Eleh Ezkerah* on Yom Kippur, or *Arzei ha-Levanon, Eli Tziyyon*, and "*Tziyyon ha-lo Tish'ali*" on Tisha' be-Av. More *piyyutim* could be named that have remained equally inspiring. But literally hundreds of

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because Jews today do not share the conceptual universe upon which they are based: "It is not only their manner of expression which primarily estranges the *piyyutim* from us, but mainly the fact that our inward life and our thought-world no longer grow on Israel's soil, that is, upon Jewish knowledge. They would be alien to our generation even if they had spoken to it in its mother tongue."

Hirsch concludes with a wish for the future, a future in which a new generation of Jews will "raise itself to the state of knowledge in the time of the *paitanim*, as well as the *Chachamim*, when this knowledge was life" without the corruption of outside influences. When this happens, there will be the possibility for new *payyetanim* to flourish and create original works for a receptive audience. All in all, Hirsch finishes, even though objections to were raised to *piyyut* throughout Jewish history, "their inherent value . . . was never doubted."

I cannot resist pointing out that this last comment is a slight exaggeration (consider Rambam's absolute and complete rejection of any inherent value to religious poetry). Hirsch also alludes to objections concerning their language and style, but says that these were justified in former times when Jewish knowledge was widespread. But as we have seen, it seems that many Jews had a good deal of trouble with the language and style of *piyyut* even before modern times.

There is no clear practical conclusion in Hirsch's essay about how *piyyutim* should or should not be used today. But one gets the impression that he would like them to be continued in anticipation of future generations which will truly appreciate them once again: "May the *piyyutim*, the witnesses of a happy period, become the means of reattainment of such an age!" Hirsch also recommends that they serve as models for any public speaker, who "should try to become for his congregation that which they were meant to have been." I will respectfully add two thoughts to his important comments. First, that present conditions must also be taken into account, in which *piyyut* often constitutes a major source of *tirha de-tzibbura* and even causes people to be turned off by prayer rather than inspired by it. And secondly, with the major advances in printing techniques today, *mahzorim* are published that include every *piyyut* according to all of the major customs, but do so in a different format to show that they are optional additions. In this way *piyyutim* can be forever preserved so that the potential meaning which some outstanding individuals find in them will never be lost, while at the same time they will not serve as a detriment to prayer for others. Two English-language *mahzorim* that serve this purpose well are *The Metzudah Mahzor* by Rabbi Avraham Davis and *The Artscroll Mahzor*.

others are recited year after year as *selihot*, *kinot*, *yotzerot*, or *hoshanot* (especially on *Hoshana Rabba*). These texts rarely fulfil any Torah value for the people who say them; they only continue to be recited by most because of the simple fact that they are printed in the siddur (or in the *mahzor* and *selihot* books). The major reason that most *piyyutim* have been rendered religiously meaningless whenever they are recited is that the language of medieval *piyyut* is in no one's language today, not even the language of *talmidei hakhamim* (Torah scholars) or other cultured Jews. This is as true for the complicated mode of expression in the *piyyutim* as it is for their difficult vocabulary. In that case, to whom do the *piyyutim* speak nowadays? Or, more precisely, who speaks to God through the *piyyutim*?

This issue is not cut-and-dried. It would be as wrong to say that *piyyut* should be completely eliminated as it would be to say that all of the traditional *piyyutim* must always be recited. Any decision on these matters must ultimately be based on the needs and desires of community members who pray. What follows are a few suggestions, some of which have already been implemented in various synagogues.

To begin with, it is especially important for those who recite *selihot* and *kinnot* to consider that there is no religious value in rushing through them just to keep up with the *hazzan*. The *piyyutim* are very complicated, so if they must be recited then they cannot be rushed. For those who insist on reciting *selihot* it would make sense to choose one *piyyut* each morning, to study it carefully with a commentary or translation, and then to recite it slowly, with feeling.<sup>44</sup> The *tzibbur* will probably finish ten or fifteen pages of *selihot* in the same amount of time!

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44. A number of *aharonim* stressed that *piyyutim* must be studied before they are said because they are so hard to understand; the sources are collected in Weingarten, p. 3 and 21–22, and in *Ta'amei ha-Minhagim* 247–248.

Weingarten's avowed purpose, in his "Explanatory Order of Selikhot," is to provide people with the means to fulfil these admonitions and say the *piyyutim* in *selikhot* with understanding. To achieve this, he paraphrased the difficult texts in simple Hebrew and printed this "explanation" alongside the actual *piyyutim*. All of this "is in order to make it as easy as possible for the person who prays to study the explanation during prayer and understand them [the *selikhot*]" (p. 3). A number of similar editions of *selikhot* with explanations or commentaries have been published in recent years.

One question remains, however: If the purpose of *piyyut* is to express profound and vivid religious feelings that can only be touched upon by using poetry, then is not their very purpose defeated when people have to rely on "translations" of these medieval Hebrew poems into modern Hebrew prose? Because this is, indeed, what Weingarten's explanations amount to: translations. Theoretically, it is at least possible that through advanced study of a *piyyut*, a person will be able to mean it when he says it later on. But is this true when he reads a translation or explanation during his prayer in order to understand it? Can the purpose of religious poetry, as described by Maharal, ever be achieved by these means?

What I mean is that normally, if a person understands the words of a prayer, then at least the potential exists for him to mean it sincerely. But if the sincere meaning of a poem is buried precisely in its elaborate and complicated structure and language, then what good is there even in understanding the words through a

I have always thought that the time spent reciting *selihot* in the weeks preceding Yom Kippur and on fast days could be better used for making a private *heshbon ha-nefesh* (self-analysis) or studying *sifrei mussar* (ethical works). Perhaps the latter could be taught publicly in the synagogue before *shaharit* instead of the full *selihot*, and then the “thirteen attributes” and *vidduy* would be recited once slowly. On Tish’a be-Av, a few select *kinot* could be explained carefully and recited slowly, and the rest of the morning could be devoted to teaching matters related to the destruction.

In conclusion, *piyyut* should continue to be utilized, but only to the extent that it can be part of a meaningful conversation with God. This can be facilitated through study and explanation, by allotting generous amounts of time to the recitation of each one, and especially by drastically cutting the volume of *piyyutim* that are to be recited. If implementing these suggestions proves impossible, or if they do not succeed in adding meaning to *piyyut*, then it should be avoided altogether.

## NEW LITURGY

By no means do I agree with those (especially non-traditional Jews) who think that new liturgy, whether poetry or prose, is the answer to our problems with *tefilla* in general or *piyyut* in particular. On the contrary, new liturgy becomes part of the problem, not the solution! Even the best liturgy tends to become stale after not-too-long. This even happened to the *tefillot* and *piyyutim* written by the most inspired scholars and poets in our history. Do we honestly think our own creations will succeed where their works so often failed?<sup>45</sup>

“Liturgy” quickly becomes *keva* because of its very nature: it is for *recitation*, an attempt to write a prayer or a poem or a responsive “reading” for the *tzibbur* to recite together. (The Greek *leitourgia* means “a fixed ritual used for public worship.”) What we need is not new texts for people to

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commentary, which will inevitably lose this structure and language? Understanding the words of a *piyyut* may even be seen as a kind of Torah study, but can it be thought of as true prayer?

For those who continue to recite the full complement of *piyyutim* in *selikhot*, Weingarten’s book and other commentaries on and translations of *piyyutim* will undoubtedly improve the level of that recitation to some degree. But it is still not clear that such recitation is justified in the first place, even with his innovative commentary or another like it.

45. I do not mean, God forbid, that the *payyetanim* or their compositions were failures. The *piyyutim* certainly helped to fulfil a great mitzvah for their creators and for whoever appreciated them from a religious perspective. However, their creators never intended their recitation to become an obligation for future generations, and would regret their becoming a burdensome obligation to be chanted mindlessly by people who do not appreciate their true worth. If *piyyutim* have failed it is not because of what they are, but because of their appropriation as liturgy in an obligatory sense, which they were not meant to be.



recite repeatedly, but freedom for individuals to be creative and alive, to speak to Hashem in their own words each time they encounter Him in prayer. The focus of our prayers is the *tzibbur*, but (as we have learned in previous chapters) this in no way means that each of its members must all recite exactly the same words. Individual *hiddush* is the solution; public "liturgy" remains part of the problem.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR WOMEN'S PRAYER GROUPS

Let me make it clear at the outset that I am not ideologically opposed to the gatherings known as women's *tefilla* groups. Their avowed purpose is to let observant women maximize their *kavvana* in a way that is unavailable to them in the traditional synagogue service. This is a noble goal which should obviously be encouraged. Given the poor state of *tefilla* in our time, it is wonderful that at least some groups are making a special effort to make prayer a serious confrontation with God, instead of just rote ritual!

After the discussion in this book, however, it seems that women who organize *tefilla* groups should reevaluate one crucial aspect of what they do. The fact is that most of what takes place in these groups is simply a modified version of what goes on in a typical synagogue, to the extent that halakha allows it. But (if this book has been successful) we have shown that *tefilla*, as it is actually practiced in most synagogues, does *not* achieve the ideals that Hazal hoped it would. Synagogue prayer is *not* a good model for women's *tefilla* groups to copy, because the fixed prayers usually fail to be meaningful for men, too! (This is true despite the fact that men participate more actively by leading the *tefillot* and reading the Torah.) Why, if women are free to create their own *avoda sheba-lev*, do they copy men by appropriating fixed texts from the *siddur*?

In this instance, it seems that halakha allows women much more flexibility than men to pray in the ideal sense that Hazal advocated.<sup>46</sup> Rather than simply reading pages from the *siddur*, women could make their "prayer groups" into forums for real *hiddush* in *tefilla* by encouraging informal personal prayer on the part of each individual.

I do not mean that women should only recite *tehinot* and *tehillim* (psalms). But the *tehinot* have gotten a "bad rap" in that they were viewed as inferior substitutes for the regular fixed prayers of men, to be used by women who did not know Hebrew. I hope I have been able to make it clear that, on the contrary, these women's prayers are actually *superior* to men's prayers in terms of Hazal's ideal of *tefilla* with *hiddush*. Not only could women's prayer groups gain by taking advantage of this rich heritage, but men should learn from it as well!

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46. Women can set their priorities about which *tefillot* to say and how long to spend on them more readily than men. This also makes it easier for them to set aside time for their own personal conversations with Hashem, if they consider that to be valuable.

It may be that women's *tefilla* groups have thus far copied what men do simply because they have no other model to work from. I heard about one woman who said that, in fact, the fixed tefillot work well in these groups (though they so often fail for men) precisely because the groups meet relatively infrequently. In other words: fixed prayers are very likely to be performed habitually by men who say them three times every single day, but can retain their "freshness" for women whose *tefilla* groups usually meet just once a month. I'm sure there is some truth to that argument. However, I do hope this book has made it clear that a lot could be gained by making innovation and informal prayer (not just passages drawn from the siddur) a major aspect of women's *tefilla*.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR A "UNIFIED" ISRAELI NOSAH

Some have always hoped that the creation of the State of Israel and the ingathering of the exiles would eventually lead to the disappearance of the various "versions" of the siddur and the emergence of a single "standard" text. This hope derived from a certain brand of religious Zionist ideology which hoped for the creation of a unified Israeli religious culture. It viewed competing customs as a legacy of the Diaspora that would eventually disappear.

It was further suggested that if a "unified" version could not be achieved universally, then it should at least be adopted for the Israel Defense Forces, where religious Jews from different ethnic backgrounds are forced together.<sup>47</sup> The "unified *nosah*" that was chosen by the Military Rabbinate is really the Ashkenazic version commonly called *Nosah Sefarad*. This version may be seen superficially as a sort of "compromise" between the Ashkenazic and Sephardic siddurim because it combines elements from both (though it completely ignores the Yemenite Jews). But Sephardic authorities were quick to forbid their communities to sacrifice their own traditions for the sake of this "unified version."<sup>48</sup> Especially in view of the ethnic tensions that remain below the surface of Israeli society, it is a shame that the siddur chosen for the army's "standard" version is actually the one used by most Ashkenazim in Israel!

None of the hopes for a "unified" siddur has materialized, and in my

47. See the siddur published by the IDF's military rabbinate (*Nosah Ahid*). Also see Yehuda Nini, "Al Efsharuyot ha-Tefilla ba-Tzava Hagana le-Yisrael" in Cohn, pp. 233–234; S. H. Weingarten, "Nosah Ahid" *Turei Yeshurun* 4, no. 28 (1972): 22–26; S. Tal, "Be-Ikvot ha-Ma'amar 'Nosah Ahid'," *Turei Yeshurun* 4, no. 30 (1972): 14–16.

Also see the following two articles in *Tehumin*, which are particularly valuable because they debate Rav Kuk's views on changing *nosah*: Yair Dreyfus, "Keviat Nosah Tefilla le-Minyan Hadash" vol. 9, pp. 388 ff. and Yaakov Ariel, "Le-Ahdutah shel ha-Kehilla be-Nosah ha-Tefilla," vol. 9, pp. 198–202. The second article contains responses by Dreyfus as footnotes.

48. See the discussion in *Yabia Omer*, vol. 6 (10) about Sephardic students using *Nosah Sefarad*. Also see *Iggerot Moshe, Orach Hayyim*, vol. 2 (21 and 24).

opinion this is a positive development. If we must speak in terms of Zionist ideology, then I would point out that the free competition of many different wordings has historically been characteristic of *tefilla* in Eretz Yisrael. It was in the Babylonian exile, not in Israel, that ever-increasing standardization and rigidity became the norm. "Prayer as Conversation" mitigates against the very notion there is any religious value at all to the idea of one standard "unified" text.

A much more "religious Zionist" resolution to competing traditions would be to train all religious children and young adults in yeshivot to be comfortable praying with Jews from other ethnic backgrounds. They should study the *minhagim* (customs) of all groups and *experience tefilla* with them as much as possible. In practice, each person should adopt what has become the common *pesak*: for things which are said privately, follow your own custom. But for things which are said out loud with the *tzibbur*, say it their way.<sup>49</sup> Or, in a mixed crowd like an army base, let the entire *tzibbur* adapt to whatever *nosah* the *sheli'ah tzibbur* happens to use.

Observant Jews are able to become familiar enough with each other's customs to accomplish this. They should learn to feel comfortable with one another, rather than feeling like outsiders when they pray with other Jews who have different *minhagim*. *Minhag* should be an inheritance that enriches all of *Kelal Yisrael*. It must never become a factor that makes us uncomfortable praying together with each other.

## A SUMMARY OF PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES FOR KAVVANA

We touched on a wide variety of topics in this chapter. The thread connecting all of them was that each has some practical importance for making Jewish prayer a true "conversation with God" according to our working definition of *kavvana* as simple sincerity. Most of the practical suggestions were meant for *individuals* who pray, either as part of a congregation or by themselves. Why I focused on individuals rather than communities will soon be made clear.

But first, here is an overview of the basic steps I have found helpful in making my own *tefilla* a real conversation with God. Most of these points are scattered throughout the earlier parts of this chapter, along with further

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49. See *Iggerot Moshe*, *Orah Hayyim* 2:23. According to Rabbi Moshe Feinstein of blessed memory, anything that is said only when a minyan is present (such as *kedusha*) must be said in the *nosah* of the *tzibbur*. A person may say the silent *Amida*, however, in his own *nosah*. Things that many people have the custom to say out loud, such as *pesukei de-zimra*, should be said in the *nosah* of the *tzibbur*. But if a person finds this difficult, he may say *pesukei de-zimra* in his own *nosah* quietly.

However, a person who is functioning as the *sheli'ah tzibbur* for a community with a different *nosah* than his own must say his silent *Amida* in the *nosah* of that community. The reason for this is that the entire purpose of his *tefilla be-lahash* (silent prayer) is to prepare him for his public *tefilla*. Therefore, he must prepare himself in the using the words that he will actually say in *hazarat ha-shatz* (2:29).

elaboration and justification, but they will be presented here as parts of a unified practical approach. I offer these suggestions in the hope that they will be valuable aids to others as they have been for me.

First of all, a "philosophic" point: Do not be misled into thinking that technical halakhic observance has anything whatsoever to do with *kavvana* (at least in the simple sense of the word). Some readers may think this is obvious, but it took me years to realize it personally. Halakha demands that the words be recited carefully, that all of the relevant laws and customs during prayer be observed, and that the pray-er "keep in mind" the meaning of the words that he says. But none of these demands, including the last one, is really a demand for simple *kavvana*. It is all too easy to train oneself to say the words carefully and to learn and observe the laws of prayer. There are plenty of books on the topic and many rabbis are willing to help explain the details. But saying the words conscientiously and knowing and keeping all the laws of prayer properly can easily devolve into a rote habit unaccompanied by *kavvana*. Careful recitation and proper practice are praiseworthy achievements, of course, but it is still a far greater achievement, and a far more difficult struggle, to sincerely mean what you say.

The same is true for the demand that one "think about" the meaning of the words. To do so is a demanding mental exercise, and for some people who don't yet know any Hebrew but also don't want to depend on a translation, it may involve rigorous study. But "thinking about" the meaning of the words is *not* simple *kavvana* (i.e., sincerity) if it is no more than a rigorous exercise in translation. For simple *kavvana* is not to *know* what the words mean intellectually, not to *think* about them, but to *mean* them. Like careful recitation, to understand the words and think about what they mean is a *prerequisite* for *kavvana*, but it is *not kavvana* itself.

Nevertheless, these prerequisites must be met in order to eventually attain *kavvana* for the daily prayers. It is important to realize that developing *kavvana* is a lifelong process, of which training oneself to do these "technical" things properly is an intrinsic part. One cannot *mean* the prayers in the siddur with *kavvana* unless he has learned to say them and studied what they mean. One also cannot supplement them (as we will soon describe), unless he has first mastered them.

Therefore, the first step towards simple *kavvana* for the obligatory prayers is to learn to say them correctly, with fluency and understanding. The *only* way to achieve this, in my experience, is to say the obligatory blessings (of the *Shema*, and the *Amida*) and spend as much time and mental energy saying them as is needed every single day, *even if this means you will have to skip the rest of the prayers*. If you do this, you will become familiar with them in short order, perhaps a matter of months. You are likely to find you will know them by heart before long, even if you have a weak background in Hebrew. (We will get to the possible value of knowing the prayers by heart soon.) But this will only happen if you do the "drudge" work of saying the words carefully, one by one, and often take time to compare them to their translations. It is more important to do this than to say "all" of the prayers every day: you will never become truly fluent in the prayers, much less learn them by heart, if you mumble all of them rapidly

with no concentration. It is far better to say less to God and be serious about what you *do* say. Even if you have to skip more than what you say in terms of pages, you will find that in the long run it is worth it.

Understanding is also a prerequisite to *kavvana*, as we said. Find a translation or commentary that suits you (I highly recommend using a linear translation if possible), and study a small part of the prayers at a time. Perhaps study the meaning of just one blessing each week (or even each month) and put your effort into concentrating on that blessing when you pray. Review! Review again! By doing this, you can learn the meanings of all the major blessings in less than a year.

But as we said, careful recitation and understanding the words are only prerequisites for *kavvana*. It is easy to do both and still not really feel you are talking to God. The real goal is to *mean* what we say to God with every fiber of our being. But how can we achieve this?

What often works for me, as I described earlier in the chapter, is to insist on always saying the words “like I mean them.” This idea was contributed by hasidism, namely that sincerely spoken words have the ability to affect not only the emotions of another, but one’s own as well. Saying the words in the same sincere tone of voice one would use if he said them to another human being can arouse his own soul and help him to mean what he says from the depths of his heart. The kind of careful pronunciation we mentioned before cannot arouse the heart unless it is *colorful* expression, with feeling. Chanting in a monotone—even in a very clear monotone—won’t work. In short, saying the words “as if” one means them does not guarantee that he does; but it gives him at least the *opportunity* to really mean them, along with a certain amount of motivation to do so.

If you insist on only praying with a sincere tone of voice, the kind you might use to talk to another human being in an analogous situation, it will inevitably force your prayers to take much longer. It will probably also force you to skip a lot of what is in the siddur. But it is worth it. It has the power to break the cycle of mindless muttering that prevents *kavvana* on a daily basis. And if you do *not* say the words “like you mean them,” at the pace of normal human conversation and with a sincere tone of voice, then *kavvana* becomes practically impossible on a daily basis. So for whatever prayers you *do* say, make sure that your tone of voice matches the meaning of the words you say. When you catch yourself in a monotone, stop and think about what you are saying. “Say it like you mean it!” Remember: *kavvana* means sincerity.

Now, none of this can be accomplished by a person sitting in the synagogue on an average weekday morning who is obsessed with saying the prayers at the pace of the *sheli’ah tzibbur*. If you are going to pray “like you mean it” then you cannot say everything at someone else’s pace (especially if the person you are trying to keep up with is someone who “prays” far faster than a normal human being would ever speak to a friend). This is why, in general, you should pray at your own pace and not worry too much about keeping up with the *sheli’ah tzibbur*. *Never* rush *any* *tefilla* that you do say; *always* say the words slowly and carefully and with feeling. If there is not enough time to do so, then just don’t say the particular prayer.

Be fanatical about this! Remember that (as we read in chapter two) Rambam called it “an absolute sin” to rapidly mutter words addressed to God. It is far better *not* to say such a prayer at all than to rush it, when the particular prayer is *not* a halakhic obligation. Get over the hang-up telling you not to skip anything! It is worth skipping other prayers so as not to feel pressured during the *Amida*, or during other obligatory blessings that you *do* say to God. Skip others so that you can say these like you mean them.

Whenever you are distracted, pause to focus your thoughts and feelings before continuing. Don’t rush! Quality is more important than quantity. Similarly, if you are in the middle of an obligatory prayer (such as *Shema*, its blessings, or the *Amida*) and you find it distracting to pay attention and/or respond to *kaddish*, *kedusha*, *barekhu*, etc., then simply ignore them. One who is involved in the performance of one mitzva is exempt from other mitzvot.<sup>50</sup> Your current mitzva is your conversation with God, and you cannot fulfil it properly with interruptions (even “holy” interruptions like *kaddish* or *kedusha*). But if the prayer you are saying is *not* obligatory, then just stop and respond with the congregation.

So far we have made two basic points in this summary: “Say it like you mean it” and “Don’t say everything.” These, on top of basic familiarity with the prayers gained through careful recitation and observing the *halakhot* of prayer, are the *conditions* for *kavvana* on a daily basis. But we have not even gotten to *kavvana* itself yet! The next step is to really *mean* what you say, and that takes a great deal of emotional effort. I don’t think it is possible to achieve this for all the prayers at once, just as it is impossible to gain the conditions we already discussed overnight. *Kavvana* is a process, and a long-term one. That is why many people who are sensitive to the special problems of *kavvana* for prayer have suggested building personal *kavvana* a little at a time. Many suggest focusing on one specific blessing for a week, or maybe a month, and really making yourself mean it. In truth, this sober and mature piece of advice has a noble lineage, for it can be traced back to no less a personality than Rambam himself. As we mentioned in chapter five, Rambam wrote that it might take a person “many years” to achieve *kavvana* for all of the *Shema* and the *Amida*, and only after achieving this for years did Rambam suggest that a person make a further attempt to reach the same level of *kavvana* when he listens to the Torah being read. Here is the idea that *kavvana* for prayer is a long-term process! It is reasonable to suppose that even for *Shema* and the *Amida*, Rambam would have said that developing *kavvana* is based on even smaller steps, though he didn’t go into details. Perhaps the attempt to “mean” one blessing will take a month, or even a year. The point is to continually grow and build on what one already has.

The idea that *kavvana* is something that “grows” with a person, that it is a long-term process, fits in perfectly with the simple idea of “prayer as conversation.” If prayer is really talking to God, then we have a relationship

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50. For halakhic sources to justify doing this, see above, note 21.

with God that we approach in human terms. Part of a human relationship is that it takes time to reach fruition, but that each side respects the other in the meantime if it is clear that his motivations are sincere. If we show God a sincere attempt to slowly but surely develop our *kavvana* for our conversations with Him, then perhaps He will forgive us when we often don't "mean" our prayers in the beginning, along with our unavoidable human lapses along the way as we improve.

But the idea that *kavvana* is a "life-long process" is not enough for simple prayer. Left to itself, it might give the impression that *kavvana* is something that develops according to a rigid plan. But nothing could be further from the truth. While we have to *try* to make ourselves better at it, and this may involve planning, in no way does this mean that something as spontaneous as *kavvana* can or will or even should always proceed according to plan! Even great personalities who undoubtedly developed their *kavvana* throughout their lifetimes found that *kavvana* was impossible for them at times, as we saw in the beginning of this book. To conjure the emotions that make a person laugh or cry three times a day is too much to ask of any human being. Quite often, perhaps even the majority of the time, *kavvana* will remain impossible for us. But it is still our job to pray in a way that will *allow* us to have *kavvana* sometimes, and encourage us to mean what we say as much as possible. Learning *kavvana* as a life-long process is not meant to guarantee total *kavvana* at the end of that process, but to let each of us achieve *kavvana* as much as is humanly possible. God doesn't expect us to be superhuman when it comes to praying with *kavvana*, but He certainly expects us to make the best effort we possibly can, as the *halakhot* demanding *kavvana* make clear.

On a more positive note, there will be times when you are struck by a particular blessing or prayer and want to say it because, at that moment, you know you will totally mean it. So say it, even if it does not fit in to your predetermined plan for study and effort. *Kavvana* can benefit from concentrated planning, but it is still not essentially something that conforms well to rules. If you know that some prayer can, at a certain moment, be a true part of your conversation with God, then don't let the opportunity slip by.

One more way to encourage ourselves to mean what we say during the obligatory halakhic prayers is to pray with sincerity in our own words as well. If we learn to speak to God in our own words, that can also help us better appreciate what we are saying to Him when we address Him in the words of the siddur. So add your own general ideas whenever they match the central theme of long blessings. *Hiddush* is an important ally in the battle to avoid *keva* and attain *kavvana*. (But remember: this may not be done in the first blessing of the *Amida*. Personal petitions are not appropriate in blessings of praise or thanks; they only belong in the *Amida*'s middle blessings. For those petitions, the thing to remember is to talk to God about things relating to the topic of the particular blessing.) Furthermore, it is always appropriate and praiseworthy to talk to God in your own words outside the formal structure of the blessings. As we said in chapter eight, the public rabbinic blessings were meant to supplement the biblical prayers to God of individuals, not to replace them. So whenever you can and whenever you want to—talk to God! Only the sense of having a true

relationship with Him, a sense conveyed and reinforced by informal prayer, can give meaning to the obligatory prayers as well.

Here are a few more miscellaneous things that I have found helpful in my own *tefilla*. I know that not all of them will work for everyone, so please just consider them respectful suggestions:

- (1) When you read something from the siddur, remember who is saying the words to whom. During *Shema*, close your eyes and imagine that Moses himself is telling you "Hear O Israel!" During blessings and most other prayers, speak the way you would to a respected and beloved king, master, or father. When a prayer of praise calls on other people or the forces of nature to praise God or to thank Him, then close your eyes and imagine yourself commanding them: "Praise God!"
- (2) Consider closing your eyes when you pray. This assumes, of course, that you have carefully recited the prayers daily for quite some time, and know them by heart fluently, especially the *Amida*. I personally find that *reading* the *Amida* gives me the feeling that I am not talking to God through it, just reciting someone else's words. But when I close my eyes and *say* the *Amida* instead of reading it, it feels like I am really talking to God.

Furthermore, *reading* the *Amida* inhibits *hiddush*, at least for me. If I have the feeling that I am reciting a *text*, then I find I am not moved to add to that text. But if I feel I am talking to God, not just reading someone else's words, my own words fall into place naturally.

- (3) Think seriously about your body's position and movements when you pray. The Talmud says, "One who prays should turn his eyes downward, but direct his heart upward" (*Yevamot* 105b),<sup>51</sup> i.e., the head is bent down in a humble position while the heart thinks of God.

Furthermore, think seriously about whether swaying ("shuckling") during prayer helps or hinders your *kavvana*. It may even help to experiment with both ways for a while before coming to a decision. Hasidim often found that putting their "all" into prayer (including their bodies) helped inspire *kavvana*. But for myself I have found that it does not; on the contrary, it hinders me from talking to God sincerely. I know that if I was talking to a human king I would stand still respectfully; doing so before God is better for *kavvana* than swaying, at least for me. (I suspect that many people learn to sway during *tefilla* as children and continue it as a habit, never even considering that *not* doing it may benefit them and their prayers.)<sup>52</sup>

51. Cf. *Orah Hayyim* 95:2. But also see *Orah Hayyim* 125:1 about looking upward during *kedusha*. The *Taz* says he should close his eyes when he does this.

52. On the history and halakhic validity of swaying during prayer, both the opposition to it and the hasidic advocacy of it, see Jacobs, pp. 54–67. The early hasidim sometimes took their gestures to bizarre extremes in prayers, evoking the



- (4) You may find (as I do) that saying *berakhot* and *tefillot* out loud helps you mean them better. It certainly helps to prevent rushing them. But if you do, try to balance your need for *kavvana* against other people's need not to be distracted. It is prohibited to raise one's voice during the *Amida* (partly for this reason), and permissible elsewhere. But even besides the *Amida*, it is necessary to find a happy medium between a level of volume that inspires you and a level of volume that won't disturb the people near you.<sup>53</sup>
- (5) If you happen to be an Ashkenazic Jew raised in the Diaspora, but you later became comfortable communicating in modern spoken Hebrew, then consider adopting the Israeli pronunciation for prayer as well. I did this. It felt awkward at the very beginning, and it may even have stifled *kavvana* for a short while. But in the long run it added to my *kavvana* immensely, for one simple reason: it let me talk to God the same way I talk to people. It helped make my prayer more of a true conversation with God, and less of a ritualistic recitation.
- (6) Do not be overly dismayed if you often fail to have any *kavvana* at all. The more important thing is to train yourself to pray in a way that will *allow* you to have *kavvana* at least sometimes. God expects you to do the best you can, no more and no less.

Remember that, in chapter two, we learned a person is forbidden to pray in principle when his state of mind won't allow *kavvana*. When that principle was also applied in practice, it indeed made prayer-without-*kavvana* an outright sin: How dare we talk to God and not mean what we say to Him?! But nowadays the practical halakha is that a person *must* say the obligatory blessings even if he *cannot* have *kavvana*. (If this practice hadn't been adopted Jewish prayer would have disappeared entirely, as we saw.) God does not expect us to do the impossible; He only wants us to make a sincere attempt to mean the obligatory prayers as best we can. So let us at least say them in a way that inspires *kavvana* instead of mitigating

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wrath of the *mitnaggedim*. Moderate movements would not have inspired such heated opposition.

But even moderate swaying seems to oppose the most basic idea of prayer, as Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz wrote in *Shelah*, pt. 2, *inyanei tefilla*, p. 79 (quoted from Jacobs, p. 55): "Any authority" justifying swaying during prayer "should be ignored since experience proves that to stand perfectly still during prayer is an aid to concentration. Just see for yourself! Would a man dare to offer supplication to a king of flesh and blood if his body moves as the trees of the forest in the wind?"

I tend to think that *Shelah's* "proof" from experience is subjective; I know that there are those for whom swaying *does* improve *kavvana*. But I also know that *Shelah* is entirely correct in my personal experience, and I suspect that what he says is probably also true for many people who sway and have never really questioned whether they should do it.

53. On raising one's voice during prayer, see *Orah Hayyim* 101, and especially *Arukh ha-Shulhan*, which has a good summary of the issue. Technically, it only constitutes a problem for the *Shemoneh Esrei*.

against it, so that *kavvana* will be a frequent part of our obligatory daily prayers instead of a rare surprise. But when this fails and *kavvana* is absent, we should realize it is due to our legitimate human limitations, and that God knows this.

- (7) Finally, vote with your feet. If you are lucky enough to live in a community with more than one convenient synagogue to pray in, choose the one that best motivates you to pray with *kavvana*.<sup>54</sup> For instance: A warm, friendly community may inspire you to mean the plural prayers even more. A community whose members are sincerely devoted to Torah study and acts of kindness may motivate *kavvana*. More specifically, a synagogue with an atmosphere of respect for prayer encourages *kavvana*, while the opposite stifles it. For the most part, the only talking you should hear during prayer is people talking to God, not to anyone else!

A synagogue where the prayers are rushed is not likely to inspire *kavvana*. But conversely, a synagogue where the prayers take extra long for no good reason is equally likely to stifle *kavvana*. On more a positive note, choose a synagogue where the atmosphere of prayer created by the *sheli'ah tzibbur* helps you mean what you say. For me—since I personally find classical *hazzanut* uninspiring and disruptive to *kavvana*—this means finding a place of prayer where the people leading the prayers meet the basic requirements of the halakha, no more and no less: The *shali'ah tzibbur* should be a committed Jew and an admirable person, he should have a clear voice that is pleasant to listen to, and he should say the prayers with understanding and *kavvana*. The way he says them should not be overstated nor understated, but simply true to what they mean. In addition, I find it better when he does not do too much singing without the congregation singing with him.

The previous paragraph states my own personal preferences, but the general rule for everyone—even for those whose preferences differ from my own—is clear: After you decide what kind of atmosphere inspires *kavvana* for you, try to choose a place to pray meeting those criteria. And then take advantage of that opportunity by really talking to God.

This last point leads into suggestions not just for individuals, but for whole communities as well. All of the previous suggestions were meant for individual Jews, whether they pray by themselves or together with a minyan. But I am extremely apprehensive about giving advice as far as

54. For the halakhic basis permitting this, see *Shu"t Radbaz*, vol. 3, 772 (910). This is translated in Jacobs, pp. 43–44. Just as Hazal said a person can only study and acquire wisdom “in the place his heart desires,” the same is true of prayer with *kavvana*! The reason Jacobs cites this piece is because it served as a justification for *hasidim* to break off from the larger community and form their own *shteiblach* (“prayer-houses”). However, it is clear that the centuries old ruling did not intend to deal with Hasidic practices directly.

entire congregations or communities are concerned. Instead, I will only suggest two basic guidelines, which admittedly conflict with each other to some degree:

- (1) On the one hand, make sure that the *sheli'ah tzibbur* allows very generous amounts of time each and every day for *Shema* with its blessings and the *Amida*.
- (2) On the other hand, do everything possible to avoid *tirha de-tzibbura* and make *tefilla* shorter.

The officials in charge of synagogues who choose to adopt these two guidelines will find that they must make various compromises and practical trade-offs as they look for creative solutions to resolve the inherent friction between these two opposite demands. But there is not and cannot be a simple cure-all for the problems of *tefilla* be-tzibbur.

The main reason I prefer to give advice to individuals rather than to communities is that true and lasting change occurs gradually. The world does not change overnight, nor will Jewish communities or their synagogues. Instead, sincere and committed individuals who continually do their best to really talk to God in their prayers can serve as good examples for others to emulate. This and only this has the potential to ultimately create deep and lasting change.

Furthermore, any impact my suggestions could have for entire communities is best confined to *new* synagogues and communities. It is easier to set up a new structure along the lines I have described than to change an old one. Trying to change the way established institutions operate often leads to *mahloket* (quarrels and strife), and *mahloket* is always a far worse thing than rote prayer.

We must always be especially careful, because observant Jews tend to be extremely sensitive about changing customs (especially prayer customs), even when they have little or no basis in halakha.<sup>55</sup> This has always been true; for example, in our earlier study of *hazarat ha-shatz* we mentioned that Radbaz wanted the Egyptian Jews to change their centuries-old custom not to repeat the *Amida*. This was his ruling in principle, but he made it clear that the change should *not* be implemented in practice if doing so would cause *mahloket*: "But if the custom cannot be stopped without *mahloket*,

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55. This sensitivity is entirely justified because keeping "the custom of our fathers" is an important Torah value; for a fascinating essay on the status of *minhag* (custom) in Judaism according to four of the greatest halakhic authorities in modern times (Rabbi Hayyim Palaggi, Hatam Sofer, Hafetz Hayyim, and Rav Kuk) see Sperber, vol. 3, pp. 3–35. In vol. 5 (1995), pp. 192–203, Sperber printed an essay on Rabbi Moshe Feinstein's views on the status of *minhag* in the western world by his student, Devora Avivi.

But loyalty to customs, important as it may be, is not the only factor to be considered in our case. The halakhic objections to *tirha de-tzibbura* and praying without *kavvana* must be considered as well.

then it is better to do nothing.”<sup>56</sup> How much more so is this true in modern times, during which the Jewish people has been torn apart by the widest and deepest conflicts since our long exile began two thousand years ago! There is so much disagreement, division, and even outright hatred among our people today, including internal strife among Jews who observe the mitzvot, that nothing can justify adding another source of conflict. *Kavvana* is simply not a good enough justification for strife. I hope this book proves to its readers that the responsibility to pray with *kavvana* is a very serious one, but please: Do not be misled into thinking that meaningful *tefilla* is of a higher value than peace among fellow Jews! Adopt whatever parts of this book seem valuable to you as an individual, as long as they will not cause *mahloket* in your particular situation. But please put aside anything with the potential to ruin a peaceful environment in your community or synagogue.

## CONCLUSION

It is impossible to provide an exact model of what “Prayer as Conversation” should look like in practice. To attempt this would be self-defeating, because the very concept implies informality and personal choice rather than rigid rules. It is much easier to point out widespread practices that mitigate *against* “Prayer as Conversation,” and that is what I have done in much of this chapter. Prayer as a personal conversation with God clearly does not include mumbling, nor monotones, nor speed reading. It also does not include an obligation to spend great amounts of time reciting fixed texts, especially when those texts are not intelligible, or when they do not convey a sincere message to God. It means that there is no value to eliminating competing customs by imposing one “unified” version of the siddur.

Suggesting positive alternatives is far more difficult. It is not possible to do more than to draw general guidelines, as I have tried to do. The essence of “Prayer as Conversation” must be honesty and sincerity, for God knows whether or not we really mean what we say to Him. It must include ample time for contemplation, for the expression of feelings, and for conversation with God in a very personal way. There must be a place for both laughter and tears in a “conversational” *tefilla*, even on a regular weekday.

We must also be honest with ourselves, as well as with God. On the one hand, we cannot expect to achieve high levels of *kavvana* every single time we pray. But at the same time, we must at least give ourselves the *opportunity* to do so, and not infrequently. This is the point of reciting *tefillot*

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56. *Shu"t ha-Radbaz*, *ibid.* Also see the responsum by Rabbi Joseph Saul Nathanson (*Shu"t Shoel u-Meishiv* 4:135), discussed in Jacobs, pp. 165–166. Though he opposed the hasidic change to *Nosah Sepharad*, Nathanson still wrote that if a person is asked to be the *shali'ah tzibbur* in a hasidic synagogue he should follow their (mistaken) custom: “The main thing is to behave always with humility and never to quarrel over these matters. The Lord who searches all hearts knows full well that your intention is for the sake of Heaven” (Jacobs’s translation, p. 166).

with care and with feeling “like we mean them” (even when we are preoccupied and we don’t). If we don’t say tefillot “like we mean them,” then rushed, unfeeling prayer becomes a firm habit and sincere, emotional prayer becomes a rarity or an impossibility. When that happens, our tefillot have failed.

In the siddur, we are constantly faced with images of God as our King, our Master, and our Father. Sometimes he appears as our Shepherd, and occasionally even as the Beloved of the People of Israel (based on the Song of Songs). Obviously, God is really much more than any of these things. But we employ these images because we are human beings whose understanding is limited and finite. These models direct us to relate to God in an appropriate way, though a human one.

Perhaps these images provide the best possible model for “Prayer as Conversation.” It simply means that when you speak to God, be serious about the fact that you are speaking to your Father, your Master, and your King. All of the practical and detailed points made in this chapter derive from this one simple formula.

I do not expect anyone to accept all of my suggestions. They are nothing more than my own personal experience with *tefilla*, and what seems to help improve my *kavvana*. If some of them do not seem correct or valuable to you, the reader, I hope that they will prod you into thinking for yourself about to make your *tefilla* better, even if you arrive at other conclusions.

This book is offered in the spirit of one valid, alternative approach to *tefilla*. Initially, the reason I researched the topic was to help resolve my own misgivings (both intellectual and emotional) about the way *tefilla* is practiced. Therefore, I hope that the sources, ideas, and analysis in these studies will prove helpful to others who have encountered the same problems as myself. I will be rewarded if through them our prayers can become more worthy, drawing us closer to *Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu* and evoking Him to answer us, His people, with love, kindness, and mercy.



## *Additional Readings on Prayer*

The purpose of these readings is to provide a wide range of views and ideas on the purpose of prayer and the meaning of *kavvana*, including the entire gamut of opinion on prayer in medieval Jewish philosophy. The texts are presented in the order in which their authors lived. While the new translations are meant to be accurate, their primary aim is to present important perspectives on prayer to English-speaking readers. They are *not* scholarly or scientific renditions of the texts. Rather, the intention was to provide all of the texts in a usable format<sup>1</sup> easily accessible to readers to English, especially those who are unfamiliar with this sort of literature or to whom it is inaccessible.

Questions for further study are provided at the end of each reading (or at the end of each chapter within longer readings). The questions are on different levels: Some are simply to reinforce the general point of what has been learned; some are to explore unstated implications of the text on a deeper level; and some raise hard issues that I am baffled about myself. The questions often refer back to the ideas considered in the main text of the book. Many of them also contain ideas of comments not previously considered.

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1. Because of the concern for readability, in many of the texts I have simply translated references to God as "God." Medieval Hebrew referred to God in the third person in a number of ways that are clear and readable in Hebrew, but become extremely awkward and interfere with the main text if they are rendered into English literally. This is why I have simply left them as "God."



## Reading 1. Saadya Gaon on Prayer

### *Emunot ve-De'ot* / Beliefs and Opinions

#### INTRODUCTION

Rabbi Saadya Gaon (882–942) is considered the father of post-talmudic rabbinic literature. He was the first to classify and explain *halakhot* according to a logical system, and also to write halakhic codes in the vernacular, which was, for him, Judeo-Arabic. He was also famed for his liturgical poetry; his *Siddur* is both a systematic halakhic work and a collection of poetry. He commented on many biblical books, and his interpretations influenced later biblical commentators, most notably Ibn Ezra. His translation of the Torah into Arabic (*Tafsir*) was read verse-by-verse after the Aramaic Onkelos translation by the Jews of Yemen in their synagogues.

His major philosophic work is *Emunot ve-De'ot*, which is also the earliest philosophical work by a medieval Jew that has been preserved in its entirety. Therefore, it is customary to begin the history of medieval Jewish philosophy with this book. *Emunot ve-De'ot* was written in Arabic, but it became known to most of the Jewish world through the Hebrew translation of Yehuda Ibn Tibbon. Saadya also wrote other works of philosophic value beyond *Emunot ve-De'ot*, including his commentary to *Sefer Yetzira* and the introductions to his biblical commentaries, but *Emunot ve-De'ot* was his most important and influential work.

The following translation is based on the Ibn Tibbon translation, though I have also checked it for accuracy against Rabbi Yosef Kafih's Hebrew translation from the original Arabic,<sup>1</sup> and Samuel Rosenblatt's English

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1. *Ha-Nivhar ba-Emunot uva-De'ot*, ed. and trans. Yosef Kafih (Jerusalem: Sura, 1970).

translation from the same.<sup>2</sup> In the short passage we have cited here, the only important thing distinguishing Ibn Tibbon's text is that it quotes biblical proof texts more extensively than the Arabic original seems to.

Saadya's main purpose in *Emunot ve-De'ot* was to show that knowledge from revelation and tradition is complementary to—and not contradictory to—knowledge based on human reason. Therefore, prayer is just a minor theme in *Emunot ve-De'ot*.<sup>3</sup> A significant discussion of prayer appears only in the fifth of Saadya's ten essays in the book, which is on the topic of "merits and demerits": different classifications of people according to their actions. As always, Saadya tries to classify people logically (here according to their standing in God's judgement). There are ten such classifications, and the ninth one (which has to do with prayer) is the penitent. When Saadya discusses the penitent, he mentions that one thing that adds to the effectiveness of repentance is prayer for forgiveness.

He also mentions that at times even sincere repentance does not mean that God will revoke the punishment He has decreed. This is the meaning of the verse, "For three transgressions of Israel, for four, I will not revoke it" (Amos 2:4). The idea is that the fourth time they sincerely repent for their sin God still forgives them, but the punishment can no longer be warded off. Saadya is not explicit, but it seems they *prayed* for forgiveness and for cancelling the evil decree the fourth time; God forgives them but the punishment remains in effect. This point is apparently what led Saadya into a short discourse on why prayer is sometimes rejected. The following section is the only significant discussion of prayer in *Emunot ve-De'ot*.

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2. Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948).

3. Besides *Emunot ve-De'ot* there is, of course, a wealth of extant materials left by Saadya Gaon, and much of it may contain important ideas about prayer. This is true of his other philosophic writings, his biblical commentaries, and his halakhic writings. But more than anything else it is true of his *Siddur*. All of this material would have to be culled for a true picture of Saadya's views on prayer. Such a survey was far beyond the scope of this book, though it will hopefully be done someday by a person who loves Saadya's Torah.

In terms of the *Siddur*, though, a great deal of valuable material was gathered by Saadya himself in his introduction: see *Siddur Rav Sa'adya Gaon*, ed. Davidson et al, (Jerusalem: Mas, 1970), pp. 1\*-4\*, 1-10. The contents of the introduction have been noted throughout this book (see chapter four, notes 14 and 26; chapter eight, notes 1 and 30). Also see chapter 8 note 9 on Saadya's attitude toward *hiddush* in prayer.



Prayer in *Emunot ve-Deot*: Text

## PART FIVE, CHAPTER SIX

Since we dealt with this matter,<sup>4</sup> I shall follow it with the rest of the things that prevent prayer from being accepted. I say that there are seven.

The first is when a person prays after judgement has already been passed upon him regarding a certain thing, as you know from the matter of Moses our teacher, may he rest in peace: "I pleaded with the Lord . . ." but God answered him by saying, "Enough! Never speak to me of this matter again!" (Deuteronomy 3:23, 26).

The second is prayer without *kavvanat ha-lev* ["directing the heart," sincerity]. As it says, "They remembered that God was their rock. . . . Yet they deceived Him with their speech, lied to Him with their words; their hearts were inconsistent toward Him (Psalms 78:35–36).

The third is someone who does not heed the words of the Torah, as it says, "He who turns a deaf ear to instruction—his prayer is an abomination" (Proverbs 28:9).<sup>5</sup>

The fourth is a person who ignores the cry of a poor man, as it says, "Who stops his ear at the cry of the wretched, he too will call and not be answered" (Proverbs 21:13).

The fifth is someone who takes money when it is wrong, as it says, "You have devoured My people's flesh; you have flayed the skin off them. . . . Someday they<sup>6</sup> shall cry out to the Lord, but He will not answer them . . ." (Micah 3:3–4).

The sixth is when a person prays without [moral] purity, as it says, "Though you pray at length, I will not listen. Your hands are stained with blood—Wash yourselves clean!" (Isaiah 1:15–16).<sup>7</sup>

The seventh is someone who has committed a great many sins and prays without repenting, as it says, "Even as He called and they would not listen, 'So,' says the Lord of Hosts, 'let them call and I will not listen'" (Zechariah 7:13).<sup>8</sup>

4. The matter of when repentance cannot cancel Divine punishment.

5. In a note to his Hebrew translation, Rabbi Yosef Kafih pointed out that Saadya expressed exactly the same idea in his commentary on Proverbs 28:9: "This means don't ask why this person's prayer isn't answered, and even his obligatory prayers are not answered. Simple logic requires this: If a servant does not heed his master, why should his master heed him?"

6. The people who have acted cruelly.

7. The passage continues, "Put your evil doings away from my sight. Cease to do evil; learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice; aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow" (vv. 16–17).

8. "I called and they did not listen," as found in some standard printings of Ibn Tibbon, is a mistake.

### QUESTIONS ON *EMUNOT VE-DE'OT*

1. Which of Saadya Gaon's seven reasons why prayer is rejected has to do with the *object* of the prayer, i.e., what a person asks God for? Which has to do with the quality of the *prayer* itself? Which ones have to do with the quality of the *person* who prays?
2. Every one of Saadya's seven points is based on a biblical verse. This being the case, do you think what he expresses here should be considered an original philosophic view or just a summary of biblical ideas on why prayer is rejected?
3. In his essay "Ra'ayonot al ha-Tefilla," Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik of blessed memory referred to our passage from *Emunot ve-De'ot*. He wrote, "In his book '*Emunot ve-De'ot*,' Rabbenu Sa'adya Gaon devoted an entire chapter to the laws of prayer, all of which are founded on a single principle—innocence of sin and purity of heart. According to him, prayer is identical to repentance. Washing the hands before prayer, about which the Rambam was so strict that he invalidated prayer, symbolizes purifying hands that are filthy with iniquity and injustice" (p. 98).

Do you agree that prayer is identical to repentance according to Saadya Gaon? In other words, does the fact that prayer is rejected without moral purity mean that the purposes of prayer and repentance are the same? If not, what is the difference between the two?

Also, do you think Saadya Gaon brought up prayer during a discussion of repentance because it is essentially part of repentance, or as a parenthetical digression? Why?



## Reading 2. Rabbenu Bahya Ibn Pakuda on Prayer

### *Hovot ha-Levavot* / The Duties of the Heart

#### INTRODUCTION

Rabbenu Bahya's *Hovot ha-Levavot* ("Duties of the Heart") is devoted to man's "inward" obligations to God. Man serves God not only through his physical actions (when he performs visible mitzvot), but also with his thoughts, feelings, and sincere intentions. Prayer, because it depends on *kavana*, is one of the most important ways to serve God inwardly, so Rabbenu Bahya stressed it time and again.

However, no one specific part of *Hovot ha-Levavot* is devoted entirely to prayer. Rabbenu Bahya mentioned prayer in roughly two dozen separate places throughout the book; some of them are just short passing references, while others are long digressions of major importance. Only by seeing these comments together can we gain a true understanding of how Rabbenu Bahya thought about prayer.

That is why this reading is presented differently than all of the subsequent ones. Since there is no chapter or group of chapters in *Hovot ha-Levavot* that can be printed here as a whole, the two dozen references to prayer are collected here and organized according to topic and theme. But just to translate and print them is not enough, because many of them can only be understood with an explanation of the context from which they are taken. For this reason, long passages will be printed as indented citations, interspersed with explanations of the contexts they are taken from and the thematic relationships between them. Sometimes individual sentences or phrases within larger paragraphs will be italicized to draw attention to a particular section's relationship to prayer.

It was not easy to find many of these references; short mentions of

prayer are often found in the middle of very long chapters, and so even to give references is sometimes hard. For this reason, a listing of the places where prayer is mentioned or discussed in *Hovot ha-Levavot* is included at the end of this reading. Besides chapter numbers and hints about where to locate the references within the chapters, each number has a brief explanation of the topic of the reference and exact page numbers in three popular editions of the work. These numbers (1–23) will also be used to point out sources in the reading (instead of regular footnotes).

The texts here are based on the traditional Hebrew translation from the original Arabic by Rabbi Yehuda Ibn Tibbon. In addition, I checked it for accuracy against the modern Hebrew translation from the original by Rabbi Yosef Kafih. I also consulted the commentary *Tov ha-Levanon* by Rabbi Israel Halevi Zamovitch (late eighteenth century).

The twenty-three scattered references to prayer are divided here into five sections according to their themes:

- A. Prayer is Service of both Body and Heart (and what this implies for praying with *kavvana*)<sup>1</sup>
- B. How Much to Pray<sup>2</sup>
- C. What to Pray For<sup>3</sup>
- D. How the Evil Inclination Tries to Ruin Prayer<sup>4</sup>
- E. How Rabbenu Bahya's Own Writings can Help with Prayer<sup>5</sup>

## Prayer in *Hovot ha-Levavot*: Text

### A. PRAYER IS SERVICE OF BOTH BODY AND HEART

When he defined the “Duties of the Heart” in his introduction, Rabbenu Bahya did *not* include Prayer in that category. Instead, he listed prayer as a *physical* performance God obligates us to perform. Bahya brought up prayer in this passage as an example in his “proof from reason” that man is obligated to serve God inwardly, not just outwardly. Prayer is mentioned as an example of this (source 1):

When I said “from reason”—It is clear to us that man is a combination of soul and body, both of which are gifts to us from God. One of these

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- 1. Includes source nos. 1, 3, 5–7, 15, 18–19, 21.
  - 2. Source nos. 4 and 9.
  - 3. Includes source nos. 2 (praying for the government), 7 (for help with *kavvana*), 8 (for “signs”), 16 (for humility and *devekut*), 17 (for forgiveness), 20 (prayer is for man, not for God), 22 (about Rabbenu Bahya's special “Petition”).
  - 4. Source nos. 10–14.
  - 5. Source nos. 22–23.

is visible and the other is unseen. Because of them we are obligated to serve God in a visible way and in an unseen way. "*Visible*" means the commandments performed by our limbs, such as prayer, fasting, and charity, and studying and teaching God's Torah, and fulfilling [the commandments of] *sukkah*, *lulav*, *tzitzit*, *mezuzah*, and [building a] fence [around one's roof], and anything similar to these things which are visible to man's senses.

But the inner service of God are the duties of the heart, such as to unify God in our hearts, belief in Him and in His Torah, acceptance of His service, fearing Him, submitting to Him, feeling shame from Him, loving Him, trusting Him, giving over our very lives to Him, separation from all that He despises, doing things for His sake, contemplating his good works, and similar things that are accomplished through hidden thought, without the outer limbs of our bodies that can be seen.

I know for certain that the physical obligations cannot be complete without the heart and soul desiring to do them, and our will to actually perform them. If we doubt that our hearts have to choose God's service and desire it, then our obligation to perform the commandments should [also] depart from our limbs, because there can be no perfect action without the soul's desire.

But since it is clear that the Creator *did* obligate our limbs with His commandments, it would not have been correct to leave our soul and heart—which are the choicest parts of our being—without obligating them to serve Him as far as they can. For they make the service complete. Therefore we have visible and hidden obligations, so that our service to God will be perfect and complete, including our hidden and visible aspects.

So prayer is an outward physical act which, like all other *mitzvot* performed physically, must be done with a positive inner attitude. But though prayer is a physical act, its effect—indeed, its true purpose—is to overcome physicality and reinforce man's spiritual side. Rabbenu Bahya explained this in the course of a discussion on how the mind is weaker than the body (source 3):

The mind is of a spiritual nature, severed from the exalted spiritual world. It is foreign to the world of coarse bodies, while man's desire is tied to the forces of nature and the properties of the elements. It is in the world it was founded from and the place of its roots. Foods draw power to it, and physical pleasures strengthen it. But the mind, since it is foreign, has no backing nor comrade—everything is against it. It makes sense for it to weaken, needing something to keep away the strength of desire from it and to be fortified against it. The Torah is the cure for this sickness, one of the sicknesses of souls and maladies of inner qualities. Thus you will find that the Torah forbids many kinds of food and clothing and sexual acts, those possessions and actions which strengthen the force of desires. Similarly, *it commands many things that stand against desire and oppose it, these being prayer,*

fasting, charity, and acts of kindness, to revive signs of<sup>6</sup> the intellect and benefit a person in this world and in the World to Come. As David said, "Your word is a lamp to my feet, a light for my path" (Psalms 119:105). And it says, "For the commandment is a lamp, the teaching is light" (Proverbs 6:23). And it was said: "I found that wisdom is superior to folly as light is superior to darkness" (Ecclesiastes 2:13).

In the first passage we saw that there are two ways we are obligated to serve God, and that prayer is in the *physical* category. However, the next passage showed that this should not be taken to mean prayer is *exclusively* physical. Throughout the rest of the book, whenever Rabbenu Bahya categorized prayer, he always categorized it as a commandment involving *both* the body and the heart (sources 5–7, 18–19). Saying the words, and other various movements associated with prayer (e.g., bowing) are the physical obligation, while *kavana* is the inward obligation. The fact that prayer is a "mixed" obligation has important ramifications for how to pray, since it is not just a physical act. In chapter three of *Sha'ar Heshbon ha-Nefesh* ("Section on Soul-Searching"), Rabbenu Bahya listed thirty different ways a person should think about his relationship with God. The ninth is the proper way for him to discharge his obligations to God. One category of these obligations includes duties like prayer, involving both the body and the heart. Because it requires *kavana*, this is how it should be performed (source 19):

If one is involved in performing one of the obligations of the heart and limbs together, like prayer and praise of God, let him turn his body away from any activities relating to this world or the Next World and turn his heart away from any thoughts that distract him from the idea of prayer, after cleansing himself and washing away all foul matter and filth, and distancing himself from any foul odor or anything similar.

Then let him call to heart to whom he is directing himself in his prayer, what he asks for in it, and what he says before his Creator through the words of the prayer and its idea.

Know that the words of prayer are through the tongue, but its idea should be in the heart: the words are like a body for prayer, but the idea is like a soul. Any time one prays with his tongue but his heart is occupied with matters unrelated to the prayer, his prayer will be like a body without a soul, or like a shell with no kernel inside, because his body is present but his heart is absent at the time of his prayer. It is about things like this that scripture said, "Because that people has approached me with its mouth but has kept its heart far from Me, [and its worship of Me has been a commandment of men learned by rote]—Truly I shall further baffle that people with bafflement upon bafflement; and the wisdom of its wise shall fail, and the prudence of its prudent shall vanish" (Isaiah 29:13–14).<sup>7</sup>

6. Kafih has "give light to," which fits the subsequent biblical verses far better.

7. Because of the critical importance of this paragraph and the next, and because

This has been compared to a servant whose master was his guest. He charged his wife and the members of his household to serve the master and to attend to his needs, while he left to occupy himself with pleasures and games. He didn't honor his master himself, nor did he serve him with grandeur as befitted him, and as he himself was supposed to do. The members of his household neglected to do even a fraction of what was necessary for his master, because of his absence. So his master was furious with him and didn't accept his service, and pushed everything back at him. Similarly one who prays: If the ideas of the prayer are absent from his mind and his thoughts, then God, blessed is He, accepts neither the "prayer" of his limbs nor the movement of his tongue.

Just consider what we say at the end of our prayer, "May the words of my mouth and the prayer of my heart be acceptable to You . . ." (Psalms 19:15).<sup>8</sup> But when a person thinks of any worldly thing, whether permissible or forbidden, and then he concludes his prayer saying, "the prayer of my heart . . . to You"—what a terrible disgrace for him to claim he spoke to his God with his hidden heart when his heart was not with Him; and then he asks Him to accept it and be pleased with him for it! He is like the person about whom it was said, "They act as if they were a nation that does what is right" (Isaiah 58:2).

Our sages of blessed memory said: A person should always evaluate himself. If he is able to concentrate then he should pray. But if he is not able to, he must not pray (*Berakhot* 30b). And at the time of his death, Rabbi Eliezer said among the things he commanded his students: "And when you pray, recognize before whom you stand" (*Berakhot* 28b). And the verse says, "Prepare<sup>9</sup> to meet your God, O Israel!" (Amos 4:12). And our rabbis of blessed memory said, "Don't make your prayer rote [*keva*]; instead make it a plea for grace and compassion before God" (*Avot* 2:13). And it says, "When my life was ebbing away, [I called the Lord to mind; and my prayer came before You . . .]" (Jonah 2:8). And it says, "Let us lift up our hearts with our hands to God in heaven" (Lamentations 3:41).

My brother, it is right for you to understand that our only purpose in prayer is the soul's agonized yearning for God, and her submission to Him along with her exaltation of her Creator; and her praise and thanksgiving to His name; and her casting all her burdens upon Him. Since it would be hard for a person to remember all of this without formulation and order, our rabbis of blessed memory wrote down the ideas needed for most classes of people, which express their needs to God and their submission because of them. These are the ideas of

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the Hebrew Ibn Tibbon version of those paragraphs has major discrepancies and variant readings, these two paragraphs follow Rabbi Yosef Kafih's modern Hebrew translation from the original Arabic.

8. This verse is said at the conclusion of the *Amida*.

9. *Hikkon*, from the same root as *kavvana*.

ordered, established prayer, through which a soul may receive her Creator and not be confounded when she prays. When she arranges the ideas of prayer in her heart she shows her submission and humility before God.

But since the thoughts of the heart are constantly changing—they hardly have existence because of the quick way thoughts pass through the soul, and it would be difficult for her to arrange the ideas of prayer on her own—our rabbis of blessed memory instituted them with prescribed words, which a person may have ready on his tongue, because one's thoughts are drawn after expression and follow speech.

Thus prayer is words and ideas: the words require the idea, but the idea does not need the words if it can be expressed in the heart, which<sup>10</sup> is our main intention, and our goal depends upon it. Consider what our predecessors (Haza!) said about when a person is pressed: "One who has a seminal emission thinks [of *Shema*] in his mind, and doesn't recite the blessings before it or after it"<sup>11</sup> (*Berakhot* 3:4, 20b). And they permitted shortening the main ideas of the prayer in a short prayer.<sup>12</sup> [If the words were the central part of prayer, they would not have let us shorten it in any manner.]<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, my brother, establish the idea of prayer in your heart, match it to your speech, and direct one intention to God through them. Keep your body from any movements, and reign in your feelings and thoughts from being occupied by any worldly matter during prayer. Compare this with how you would act toward your king when you are busy thanking him and praising him and telling of his goodness, despite his lack of awareness of your hidden intentions. How much more so for the Creator, may He be exalted, who observes your revealed and hidden aspects, what is secret and what is visible.

It is something incredible that for you, prayer is the deposit the Creator entrusts you with. His put its idea into your hands, and gave it into your possession, and none other than He will oversee it. If you pray as the Creator commanded, you have fulfilled the trust and the Creator will accept it back from you. But if you are not faithful to it with your heart and tongue, you will be among those who violate His trust, about whom the verse says, "For they are a treacherous breed, children with no loyalty in them" (*Deuteronomy* 32:20). But about the men of faith who fulfil them according to their laws and rules, "My eyes are on the trusty men of the land, to have them at My side" (*Psalms* 101:6).

In general, Rabbenu Bahya urges his readers not to be superficial creatures of habit, not to continue doing the mitzvot with no more depth

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10. The heart.

11. Because such a person is forbidden to pronounce the words.

12. For one who is in a hurry.

13. This sentence is not found in Ibn Tibbon, but is translated from the Arabic by Kafih, p. 247.



than when they were children. This is especially true of prayer, which requires *kavvana* besides just saying the words. As he wrote later in the same chapter as the previous citation, for the twenty-fourth way a person should think about his relationship with God (source 21):

The twenty fourth: Make an accounting with your soul, and take her to task regarding every matter she has become pacified about—of knowing God and His Torah, and the statements of the early ones, and the mysteries of the sages *and the ideas of prayer*—which you knew early on from the time of your childhood, and for most of the days that you grew and studied. For the forms of subtle ideas are not the same for someone of weak apprehension as they are for a person of powerful apprehension. As long as a person's apprehension increases the ideas become clearer.

So do not be content with your understanding according to what you thought at the beginning of your study of enigmatic ideas and deep notions. Rather, when your intelligence and apprehension become strong it is right for you to probe the book of God's Torah and the books of His prophets as if you had never studied any of these books. Accustom yourself to interpreting and clarifying them and contemplating their words and language; to see what ideas can be borne by the text, what is meant in its plain sense and what is not; what is clear and what is hidden; what reasoned argument is applicable and what is not.

*Do the same for prayer and praise.* Consider their words and the point of their ideas, so that when you say them before God you will know what your tongue is saying with these words and what idea your heart is asking for. Do not treat this whole matter as you did in your days of childhood, saying what words you found in whatever way you found, while you didn't know the idea. But we already explained what this idea includes sufficiently.<sup>14</sup>

But what should the "inner" service of prayer consist of? Rabbenu Bahya specifically says the proper inward feeling for prayer is that it should be with a deep sense of one's own lack of worth. This is the last of seven ways in which a person should be humble (source 15):

The seventh: *When he is involved in one of the kinds of service, like charity or prayer*, whether a commandment or optional act or [avoiding] something forbidden, he should not be involved with it if there is any pride or haughtiness in his heart. Rather, let him be submissive and humble before his Creator, both on his outside and his inside. Let him not consider what he does significant compared to his great obligation to God beyond that act of homage, as it says, "With what shall I approach the Lord, do homage to God on high? Shall I approach him

<sup>14</sup> In the passage previously cited (source 19).

with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Would the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams . . . ? He has told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice and to love goodness and to walk modestly with your God" (Micah 6:6–8).

Of all the emotions constituting the inner service of God during prayer (i.e., *kavvana*), Rabbenu Bahya stressed humility and submission to God most of all. As we shall see in the next section, this emphasis is borne out in other passages as well.

## B. HOW MUCH TO PRAY

In the previous section we saw that for Rabbenu Bahya, the words of prayer are not nearly as important as a person's sincere intentions when he prays. If this seems to imply that Rabbenu Bahya was in favor of informal prayer, that is correct. He stressed, as shall soon see in this reading, that a person can always talk to God if he has proper *kavvana*, even beyond the obligatory rabbinic prayers. But before getting to that, why were fixed prayer texts promoted in the first place according to Rabbenu Bahya? In a previous section (source 19) we read that they were instituted because it is so hard for most people to formulate their thoughts. In other words, the prescribed prayers are a *means* to true prayer, not an *end* in and of themselves. But Rabbenu Bahya added one more reason when he discussed why the Torah is necessary. Here is his second of seven reasons (source 4):

The second is that *intellectual processes cannot define the obligatory actions of subservience to God, such as prayer, fasting, tithes, and acts of kindness*. Through the intellect, man cannot determine the limits for guilt incurred by one who doesn't fulfil his obligations with subservience. Therefore, we need the way of the Torah and the guidance of prophecy to be set and defined, so that we will achieve the goal required of us by them,<sup>15</sup> this being subservience to God who is exalted. As the verse states: "God created so that men would revere Him" (Ecclesiastes 3:14).

In other words, though man knows he must serve God, he does not know the exact guidelines and limits for the mitzvot; so the Torah supplies the minimal obligation. Otherwise, people might stop after some small, perfunctory observance of minimal value. Furthermore, once the Torah set minimum requirements, whatever a person does to meet those requirements can be considered serving God.

But what about going beyond the minimum? That is not just allowed, but is praiseworthy (source 9):

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15. By prophecy and reason.

They<sup>16</sup> permitted and obligated us to accustom ourselves to adding to the *mitzvot*, as they said, "We add to the holy time from the weekday" (*Yoma* 81b), and for additional fasting and prayer and charity, and abandoning too much extra food even when it is permissible to us. And they admonished us not to take an oath with God's name even if it is the truth, and not to speak too much even if it will avoid lying, and not to mention people's affairs even if they are not disgraceful, and not to praise a person too much even if he is worthy of it, and not to relate the disgrace of those who are lacking<sup>17</sup> or despise them even if they deserve it, and many other similar things.

As we will see in the following sections, Rabbenu Bahya was true to his word about the importance of extra informal prayer.

### C. WHAT TO PRAY FOR

Rabbenu Bahya mentioned praying for many things in *Hovot ha-Levavot*:

1. He mentioned praying for the welfare of the government, for with no government people could never reach a consensus, and society would not function (source 2). The natural human urge to appoint a common leader is a gift from God. To pray for this is based on an explicit mishna: "Pray for the welfare of the government, for a man would swallow his neighbour alive if not for the fear of it" (*Avot* 3:2).

2. He mentioned Jonathan's praying to God to let him save Israel from their enemies:<sup>18</sup> "And since the Creator knew his good intention, and that the goal of his act would be for the good of Israel and to save them, He responded favorably to his request and delivered his enemies into his hand. He became the mover behind the complete salvation, and the victory over the remaining Philistines" (source 8).

Rabbenu Bahya also mentioned that it was not forbidden for Jonathan to ask God for a sign as to whether He would accept his plea. It was permissible to pray for this only because Jonathan's motives were completely sincere.

3. But Rabbenu Bahya most often mentioned praying for things of spiritual value on a personal level. In fact, this is what he stressed the most. Most importantly, a person should pray for help doing the *mitzvot*, including praying for help with prayer itself (!), i.e., for God to help him achieve *kavvana* (source 7):

A person should trust God to help him carry out the act of service after choosing to do it with a perfect and faithful heart; by agreement and effort through purity of heart and *kavvana* for His great name. As part

16. Hazal.

17. In their service of God.

18. Cf. 1 Samuel chap. 14.

of this we are required to plead to Him to help us and instruct us regarding it, as it is written, "Guide me in Your true way and teach me . . ." (Psalms 25:5). And he [David] said, "Lead me in the path of Your commandments . . ." (ibid. 119:35). And he said "I have chosen the way of faithfulness . . ." and "I cling to Your decrees, O Lord, do not put me to shame!" (vv. 30-31). And he said, "Do not utterly take the truth away from my mouth, for I have put my trust in Your rules" (v. 43).

All of these verses prove that he chose acts of service, but prayed to God for two things. The first was to unify his heart in support of his choice in His service by keeping the burdens of the world away from his heart and his eyes, as he said, "Let my heart be undivided in reverence of Your name" (ibid. 86:11), and "Open my eyes, that I may perceive [the wonders of Your teaching]" (119:18), and "Avert my eyes from seeing falsehood" (v. 37), and "Turn my heart to your decrees" (v. 36), and similar verses. And the second was to strengthen his limbs to carry out the acts of His service. This is like when he said, "Lead me in the path of Your commandments" (v. 35), and "Sustain me that I may be saved [and I will always muse upon Your commandments]" (v. 117), and many other verses like them.

In a similar "spiritual" vein, Rabbenu Bahya also mentioned praying for closeness to God and for humility (source 16):

Seek help from God for this, asking to come close to Him and achieve His desire, that He may direct you to this and prepare the way to it for you. As the pious men prayed after their prayer:<sup>19</sup> "My God, keep my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking falsehood. Let me keep silent toward those who curse me, and let my soul be like dust to all."

Similarly, asking forgiveness is one of the most important things to pray for, and Rabbenu Bahya tells us how (source 17):

There are also five conditions for asking forgiveness:

One of them is that he should confess that his sins have become very great in his eyes and his heart, as it is said, "For our sins against You are many" (Isaiah 59:12).

The second is to constantly recall them, placing them directly before himself, as it is said, "For I recognize my transgressions and am ever conscious of my sin" (Psalms 51:5).

The third is that he fast during the day and pray at night, the time when his heart is free and he is not burdened by worldly matters. As it is said, "Arise, cry out in the night!" (Lamentations 2:19). I will later explain the importance of prayer at night with God's help.<sup>20</sup>

The fourth is to plead with God and continually implore Him to

19. I.e., after the *Amida*.

20. See source 22 in Section E.

pardon his sins and forgive him and accept his repentance, as it says, "Then I acknowledged my sin to You; I did not cover up my guilt; I resolved, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' [and you] forgave the guilt of my sin" (Psalms 23:5). And it says, "Let every faithful man pray to You for this in a time when You may be found" (v. 6).

The fifth is that he try hard to warn people about his many sins, and to make them fearful of the punishment for them, and to remind them to repent of them, as it is written, "Who knows but that God may turn and relent?" (Jonah 3:9). And it is said, "I will teach transgressors Your ways" (Psalms 51:15).

Other important examples of what to pray to God for are found in Rabbenu Bahya's *Bakkasha* ("Petition"), a personal prayer he composed. Most of what it asks for are also things of spiritual value. It only asks God for the most general and the most basic material needs, like health and prosperity.<sup>21</sup>

But perhaps Rabbenu Bahya's most revolutionary idea is not about *what* we ask God for when we pray, but *why* we ask Him ask for anything. After all, doesn't God know what we need before we ask Him? And doesn't He know what is best for us better than we ourselves do? The following passage (source 20) answers these questions:

They said that one of the *tzaddikim* used to say after his prayer: "My God, it is not my unawareness of my small worth that has brought me to stand before You, nor that I lack awareness of Your greatness and exaltedness. For You are high and exalted while I am only poor and unimportant, too small and petty to ask You for anything, or call to You with praise and acclaim, or sanctify Your name, which is sanctified by voices of the high and holy angels. Rather, what has brought me to do this is that You commanded me to pray to You, and You permitted me to praise Your exalted Name as far as my understanding of Your glory allows, while showing my utter servitude and submission to You.

"You know what I need and my ways, and I haven't told You my needs to make You aware of them, but so that I will realize my utter dependence on You and my reliance on You. If in my ignorance I ask something from You which is not fitting for me or I ask for something that will not benefit me, Your exalted decision is better for me than my own choice and I hereby give over all my affairs to Your decree and Your exalted guidance." As David of blessed memory said, "O Lord, my heart is not proud nor my look haughty; I do not aspire to great things or to what is beyond me; but I have taught myself to be contented like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child am I in my mind" (Psalms 131:1-2).

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21. For more on the *Bakkasha*, see source 22 in Section E, as well as the discussion of Rabbenu Bahya's philosophy of prayer in chapter five of this book.

To conclude, the most important trait for prayer according to Rabbenu Bahya is humility and submission to God. In this last passage he makes it clear that even petition for personal needs—whatever we may ask God for—is only to promote those traits, and should only be done in that spirit.

#### D. HOW THE EVIL INCLINATION TRIES TO RUIN PRAYER

Rabbenu Bahya devoted an entire chapter to the subtle techniques the Evil Inclination uses to wean a person away from serving God. This includes stopping a person from praying, or at least ruining the spiritual value of his prayer by destroying his sincere *kavvana*. The first example is that the Evil Inclination tells a person to pray in order to show off his piety (source 10):

They said to a nobleman:<sup>22</sup> “How did so-and-so’s reading [of the Torah] please you? Wasn’t his voice pleasant, and wasn’t he fluent in the accents of the reading?”

He said: “How could his reading find favor in my eyes when he only reads it to please me and find favor in my eyes by it? It would have pleased me if he had intended to please God alone.”

The same is true of anyone who intends to find favor in people’s eyes with his prayer instead of God, such as the public prayer leaders and the *hazzanim* who use the faddish *piyyutim*: It is not acceptable to God.

If the above strategy fails, then the next thing the Evil Inclination will try is this (source 11):

When the Evil Inclination gives up trying to entice you these ways, it will try to ruin your deeds by burdening your heart with this world—its people and the great extent of your desires—and making you forget your end.<sup>23</sup> When it sees that you want to turn your heart toward the World to Come with an obligatory or optional prayer, or when you read the Torah or study any of the ideas of faith or ethics, it will confuse you, burdening your heart with worldly matters: merchandise and business, profit and loss.

Then it will tell you: you should accept this free and vacant time happily because you won’t achieve it again with the numerous matters that concern you.

The Evil Inclination continues by giving numerous examples of important worldly matters a person can think about during times that are devoted to God’s service (especially prayer). Rabbenu Bahya concludes that all of

22. From *Kafih*, p. 182. Ibn Tibbon has “king.”

23. I.e., that you will one day die, and you must be worthy of entering the World to Come.

these thoughts are meant “to burden you and ruin your deeds, because you are physically present when you do them but your heart and inner self are not present.” Even worse, a person may consciously *oppose* with what he says to God in prayer (source 12):

It is possible for a person to start and finish an act of service while he continually thinks about some other worldly matter burdening his heart. It is possible for him to ask for God’s pardon with his tongue while he enthusiastically thinks inwardly about how to defy Him! It is about this that one of the *hasidim* said: This plea for pardon itself requires a plea for pardon.

When he petitions Him with his body but turns away from Him in his heart and inner being, he becomes like what scripture says, “[That people] has approached Me with its mouth and honored me with its lips, but has kept its heart from Me” (Isaiah 29:13). And it says, “Yet they deceived Him with their speech, lied to Him with their words; their hearts were inconstant toward Him” (Psalms 78:36–37). If he wakes at that time, let him take issue with his soul and tell her: How can I act toward my Creator in a way that would even be wrong to act toward people when I need them or they need me? For if I were to ask somebody for something, but I asked it of him with my tongue and my heart was turned away from him—if he recognized this in me he would despise and detest me, and he certainly would keep what I want from me. All the more so if he knew that my heart is occupied with things that oppose his will, or even things that would make him furious at me, would his hatred of me be even greater and his keeping [what I want] from me even more justified. I would undoubtedly do the same thing to someone who asked me for something, if I knew of his heart what the Creator knows of mine. How can I not be ashamed before my Creator for wanting Him to be pleased with me for something that I would not be pleased with from someone weaker than myself. No creature would be pleased with me for it. As the verse says, “Yet they do not feel shame, they cannot be made to blush” (Jeremiah 8:12). Then the Evil Inclination will be wounded.<sup>24</sup>

But the Evil Inclination knows that even good intentions can be abused. So if he cannot get you be insincere when you pray, his next strategy is to get you to stop going to the synagogue and praying there with *kavvana* out of a mistaken sense of modesty (source 13):

When the Evil Inclination gives up trying to entice you in these ways, he will try to entice you to stop showing off [your piety].<sup>25</sup> He will tell you: “Your service to God cannot be complete, with a full heart, until

24. When a person thinks these thoughts.

25. In other words, the Evil Inclination will mask himself, appearing as a pious preacher against egotism (commentary *Tov ha-Levanon*).

you stop flaunting yourself, neither a little nor a lot. You cannot stop flaunting yourself to people unless you hide all your deeds from them, and show them the opposite of what is truly in your heart. When you pray—do it quickly; do not let your desire or effort show in it. Seclude yourself when you want to study any wisdom; let no one know of it besides the Creator. Do not let any good trait show in you; rather, exhibit laziness and lethargy when it comes to the acts of service, so that you will not earn a good reputation through it and thus lose your reward. Do not tell [others] to do good or admonish about evil. Do not make your wisdom known or teach it to any other. Do not let any symbol of the fear of heaven be seen on you, nor any of the sign of God's service, so that people will not honor you for them. To complete the ways in which you should be careful, become fast friends with all different kinds of people. Act like them, follow their paths and ways whether they are true or foolish, and do not keep away from lies and oaths so carefully. Join with them for food and drink, conversation<sup>26</sup> and superfluous talk and great levity, speak them [yourself] and mention their disgraceful things, and [do] whatever will keep a devout reputation from you in this world and among its people."

Do not heed him about this! He will ruin your faith and you will not even feel it. If you are to answer him, tell him: "You support my detractors in your war against me, and you were wise to plot against me, to destroy my power and quicken my fall! But why should I flee from a small fire into a huge fire? I only fled from love of fame and honor so as *not* to find favor with people. Yet you order me to *find* favor with them at the expense of serving God!

Of my deeds, what it is fitting to hide is whatever can be complete and perfect without people knowing. But to pray with the community and tell others to do good, to admonish about evil, to study wisdom, and to do kindness and similar things—it does not show care to leave it aside and abandon it on grounds of [not] showing off. Rather, I am obligated to do it for the sake of heaven. If people praise me or honor me for it, it will not detract in the least from my reward, because that was not my intention at the time that I did it.

It has been said: When you do an act that people know of and you want to know what your true intention is, test yourself regarding it in two ways: The first of them is to know what payment you hope for from this act and from whom you expect it. If from God—then it is perfect; if from another, then it is not. The second is to know in your soul whether, if you were isolated, you would do that act in the very same way. If it is clear to you that it is so, then your act is perfect to God, and you should do it even more. If it is less [than true], then leave it aside until your heart is purely for heaven. Then the Evil Inclination will be wounded.

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26. Following Kafih, p. 184. Ibn Tibbon has *hiddot*: "riddles" or "mysterious stories?"



One last technique that Rabbenu Bahya mentions is used by the Evil Inclination is an argument against praying at night, a practice that Rabbenu Bahya held in very high esteem.<sup>27</sup> He wrote (source 14): "If it is about praying extra at night, he will bring up to you that sleep is even more beneficial to you than food, guarding your health and strengthening your body even more than food and drink." The Evil Inclination misuses the truth for its own ends.

To sum up, the evil inclination uses all of the above methods to prevent true prayer: Pride, worldly concerns, and even beneficial things like modesty or sleep. It is a person's job, as Rabbenu Bahya explained in source 12, to talk to God sincerely despite all of the problems and false ideas that confront him when he tries to do so. In the final analysis, God knows whether or not he means what he says.

### E. HOW RABBENU BAHYA'S OWN WRITINGS CAN HELP WITH PRAYER

In a chapter about the many signs of love of God,<sup>28</sup> Rabbenu Bahya mentioned seclusion as an example of them, when a person meditates and prays by himself, especially at night (source 22):

One of them is to pray at night and fast during the day if he can bear it. For night prayer is purer than day prayer in several ways: (1) A person is more at liberty during the night than during the day. (2) The bodily desires for food and drink are lighter at night than in the day. (3) Contact with other people ceases at night, like a close friend to visit him, or an acquaintance to talk to him, or a creditor to collect his debt from him. (4) His senses rest from what stimulates them at night: he sees nothing to burden him and hears nothing to interrupt him. (5) He escapes showing off and distances himself from it because there are so few people with him at night. And he may not be able to seclude himself during the day.

One of them is that he secludes himself to think about God and be alone with Him at the same time every lover secludes himself with his beloved and every person who adores another isolates himself with the one he adores.<sup>29</sup> As it is said, "At night I yearn for You with all my being" (Isaiah 26:9); and it says, "Upon my couch at night [I sought the one I love]" (Song of Songs 3:1). The advantage of the night prayer is often mentioned in the holy books. Of them are what David said, "I remember Your name at night, O Lord" (Psalms 119:55); "I arise at midnight to praise You" (v. 68); "I arise before dawn and cry for help" (v. 147); "My eyes greet every watch of the night [as I meditate on Your promise]" (v. 148); "When I cry out at night before You, [let my

27. See the very beginning of the next section.

28. *Sha'ar Ahavat Hashem*, chap. 6.

29. I.e., at night.

prayer reach You]" (ibid. 88:2), and many others like this. And it also says, "Arise, cry out in the night" (Lamentations 2:19).

I have composed inspiring words of admonishment and contrition of the soul. They will make you earnest and inspire you to pray at night. They are in Hebrew and I have called them *Tokhaha* ("Admonition"). After them I added lucid words in Hebrew expressing praise and thanks to God and asking forgiveness and supplications—many things which awaken the pray-er and inspire his disposition. I called them *Bakkasha* ("Petition") and I wrote them at the end of this book for whoever wants to use them to pray at night or in the day.

Whoever accepts this upon himself should make it a custom to say the *Tokhaha* while sitting, after prefacing what he finds in terms of the well-known psalms or other things. Then let him pray the *Bakkasha* standing and bowing until the end. Then let him bow and say whatever supplications he wants. Right after this let him say *Ashrei Temimei Derekh* (Psalm 119, "Happy are those whose way is blameless . . .") and *Shir ha-Ma'alot* (Psalms 120–134, the "Songs of Ascents") until their end.

If he wants to choose other things or a different order he may do so, but I mentioned the finest custom for this. The main thing is, my brother, to be pure of soul when you pray it, and the *kavana* of your heart for it. And say each thing patiently before the next, not letting your tongue get ahead of your heart. For a little bit of it when your heart is present in it is better than the fast movements of your tongue for a lot of it while your heart is empty of it.

One of the *hasidim* said, "Do not say an empty praise, empty of the presence of the heart in it, but let it be with the heart present." As David of blessed memory said, "I have turned to You with all my heart; do not let me stray from Your commandments" (Psalms 119:10); and he said, "I have implored You with all my heart" (v. 58) and he said, "My body and soul shout for joy to the living God" (ibid. 84:3).

The above passage appears in the second-to-last chapter of *Hovot ha-Levavot*, and anticipates the book's conclusion. This makes it clear that one of Rabbenu Bahya's major goals for his book was to influence how people prayed. He said this one final time at the book's very end, before summing of the book's main themes in a short poem of ten stanzas (source 23). He wrote that, among many other things, he hoped the book and the poem would continue to remind the reader of how to serve God with his heart in many areas of life, "and also when it comes to your prayers." Then he finished the book with a short prayer: "May God in His mercy and majesty teach us and you the way of His service. Amen."

## QUESTIONS ON PRAYER IN *HOVOT HA-LEVAVOT*

Note: Each question refers to a specific section or source number.

1. Section A: Why did Rabbenu Bahya put *tefilla* in the same class as *sukkah*, building a fence on one's roof, etc.? (In subsequent readings, watch for those who classified prayer differently.)

2. Rabbenu Bahya wrote that the rational mind derives from the spiritual world, not the physical world (source 3). Can you think of another personality, whose views we studied, who disagreed with this?
3. The prescribed prayers are because people would have a hard time expressing themselves on their own (source 19). What dangerous implications might this notion carry?
4. Section B: What exactly does Rabbenu Bahya prove from Ecclesiastes 3:14 ("God created so that men would revere Him") in source 9? How?
5. Section C: Why does Rabbenu Bahya stress praying for spiritual things? How does this change the experience of prayer?
6. How is prayer an important part of repentance?
7. Section D (source 13): Rabbenu Bahya briefly mentioned praying with the community in terms of *not avoiding* public prayer. But nowhere does he say anything *positive* about praying with the community. He does emphasize the importance of saying extra prayers in isolation. Do you think there is any friction between Rabbenu Bahya's philosophy of prayer and the rabbinic idealization of public prayer?
8. Section E (source 22): Would you say that Rabbenu Bahya is rigid or flexible regarding prayer customs (beyond the mandatory halakhic blessings)? What implications might his attitude have for us today?

## Source Numbers

As I made clear in the introduction, some of these sources are hard to locate. So that others will not have to repeat my work, here is a full and detailed listing of the passages mentioning prayer in *Hovot ha-Levavot* that I have been able to locate, including page numbers in the following three popular editions of the book:

K = *Torat Hovot ha-Levavot*, trans. Yosef Kafih (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1984). A modern Hebrew translation from the original Judeo-Arabic.

LT = *Hovot ha-Levavot*, with an adaptation of Ibn Tibbon's translation in easy Hebrew entitled *Lev Tov* and a short commentary by Pinhas Yehuda Lieberman (Jerusalem: by author, 1965), 2 volumes. This edition has an excellent index, which made it very easy for me to find these references initially, though there are a couple of references to prayer that even Lieberman missed. There may be more that we both missed.

E = Jerusalem: Eshkol, 1978. Vowelized and punctuated with commentary *Tov ha-Levanon* (by author of commentary *Otzar Nehmad* on the *Kuzari*).

1. Introduction. K=4–5. LT= Vol. I, 28–29. E=13–14.
2. *Sha'ar ha-Behina*, chap. 5. On praying for the well-being of the government. K=76–77. LT=I, 179–180. E=128–129.
3. *Sha'ar Avodat Hashem* (also called: *Avodat ha-Elokim*), chap. 2 (no. 2).

- Prayer strengthens intellect and weakens physical. K=86–87. LT=I, 199–200. E=142.
4. Ibid., chap. 3 (no. 2). Torah had to define details. K=90–91. LT=I, 208–209. E=148–149.
  5. Ibid., chap. 4. Category. K=94. LT=I, 218. E=154.
  6. *Sha'ar ha-Bitahon*, chap. 4 (no. 4). Bitahon for category. K=151. LT=I, 341. E=244.
  7. Ibid., end of #4. To pray for help with *kavvana* for these kinds of mitzvot. K=152–153. LT=I, 345. E=246–247.
  8. *Sha'ar Yihud ha-Ma'aseh*, chap. 5. That it is not considered forbidden to pray for a sign from God. E=282.
  9. Ibid. On going beyond the call of duty. K=179. LT=II, 27–28. E=287.
  10. Ibid. On showing off through prayer. K=182. LT=II, 34. E=291–292.
  11. Ibid. The evil inclination tries to burden you to keep you from serving God. K=183. LT=II, 36. E=293–294, 295.
  12. Ibid. Not to pray insincerely. K=184. LT=II, 38–39. E=294–295.
  13. Ibid. Not praying with *kavvana* in public out of a false sense of modesty. K=184–185. LT=II, 39–40. E=295–297.
  14. Ibid. The evil inclination tries to stop a person from praying at night. LT=II, 49. E=303.
  15. *Sha'ar ha-Keni'ah*, chap. 4. The seventh way: to pray with humility. LT=II, 69. E=317–318.
  16. Ibid., end of chap. 10. On praying for *devekut*. K=213–214. LT=II, 95. E=337.
  17. *Sha'ar ha-Teshuvah*, chap. 5. Fourth condition of asking for forgiveness. K: 222–223. LT: II, 213–214. E=350.
  18. *Sha'ar Heshbon ha-Nefesh*, chap. 3. Ninth of the thirty ways in which a person should always feel himself obligated to God; this one is actions showing submission to God. On prayer being an act of submission by both the body and the heart. K=245. LT=II, 157. E=380, 381.
  19. Ibid. Since prayer involves both the body and the heart, *kavvana* must accompany the physical action of saying the words. K=246–248. LT=II, 158–162. E=381–384.
  20. Ibid. Eighteenth of the thirty ways: on prayer being for man, not for God. K=258–259. LT=II, 183–185. E=401–403.
  21. Ibid. (no. 24). On not observing the mitzvot in the superficial way one learned them as a child; in particular, not to just say the words without understanding or *kavvana*. K=264–265. LT=II, 195. E=411.
  22. *Sha'ar Ahavat Hashem*, chap. 6. On praying at night, including directions on how to say Bahya's *Tokhaha* and *Bakkasha*. K=308–310. LT=II, 281–283. E=475–477.
  23. Ibid., chap. 7 (end of book). That the book and the following summary will remind people how to pray properly. K=315. LT=II, 291. E=484.



## Reading 3. Rabbi Yehuda Halevi on Prayer

### "The Way of the *Hasid*" from *Kuzari*

#### INTRODUCTION

The *Kuzari* is historical fiction, a conversation between a Jewish scholar and the King of the Khazar nation (the *Kuzari*), who eventually adopts Judaism. The author, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, lived centuries after the Khazar kingdom's time.

So the book is not meant to be a true history. The real reason Halevi wrote it is revealed by the original Arabic title he gave it, which roughly translated means "Vindication and Proof in Defense of the Despised Religion." In other words, Halevi employs a conversation with the Khazar king as a convenient literary tool, using it as the background for his defense of Judaism.

Unfortunately, no adequate English translation of the *Kuzari* exists; the language of Hartwig Hirschfeld's 1905 translation<sup>1</sup> from the original Arabic is archaic and unreadable (as became clear to me when I tried to use it in adult-education classes). The following English version is based on the Hebrew translation by Rabbi Yehuda Ibn Tibbon,<sup>2</sup> through which the *Kuzari* became known to Jews around the world, and well-loved. It also

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1. Reprinted by Schocken Books, NY, 1968.

2. I compared the standard printing I used (Warsaw, 1880) with the Ibn Tibbon text edited by A. Zifroni (Tel Aviv: Mahberot le-Sifrut, no date). Zifroni adapted the Ibn Tibbon text to the Arabic original as published by Hirschfeld (Leipzig, 1887) and later editions. So occasionally his text is different than the traditional Hebrew text. I translated some of his emendations where they seemed to fit the context better than the "old" Ibn Tibbon version.

consults some of the commentaries written on the basis of the Hebrew version; those commentaries had a strong impact both on the translation itself and the explanatory notes.<sup>3</sup> Though it is meant to convey the flavor and spirit of Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew text, and how it has been understood by Jews over the centuries, it has also been checked for accuracy against Yehuda Even Shmuel's modern Hebrew translation from the Arabic original.<sup>4</sup>

In the section we are about to read, Halevi describes the way of life of a Jewish *hasid*, a pious man. (The term *hasid* has no direct connection, of course, with the hasidic movement that began in the eighteenth century in eastern Europe.) Prayer is of overwhelming importance in the life of a *hasid*, as Halevi describes here; thus, what follows is the major discussion of prayer in the *Kuzari*.<sup>5</sup> The *Khazar* king had asked the Jewish Scholar to describe how a *hasid* lives at the very end of Part Two: "I ask you to describe for me the way of a servant of God among you." Now, at the beginning of Part Three, the Scholar presents his answer.

### "The Way of the *Hasid*" from *Kuzari*: Text

#### PART THREE, SECTIONS 1-5; 13-22

1. Said the Scholar: The way of one among us who serves God is not that he separates from the world, such that it becomes a burden on him. And he does not despise life, which is a gift from the Creator. God mentions that it is a gift to him, as the verses say, "I will let you enjoy the full count of your days" (Exodus 23:26) and "that you may have a long life" (Deuteronomy 22:7).

Rather, he loves the world and long life, because through them he

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3. The standard Hebrew edition has two commentaries:

- (1) Despite its sometimes unjustified verbosity, *Kol Yehuda* by Rabbi Yehuda Moscati is probably the most extensive commentary enjoyed by any work of medieval Jewish philosophy; the author had an extensive background in both Torah study and philosophy (see Even Shmuel's introduction, p. 53). It first appeared in 1594.
- (2) The shorter commentary *Otzar Nehmad* by Rabbi Israel ha-Levi Zamovitch was first published in 1795. Though it often borrows from Moscati's comments, it is rendered more useful by its reasonable length. The same author wrote the best-known commentary on Rabbenu Bahya's *Hovot ha-Levavot*, called *Tov ha-Levanon*.

4. Jerusalem: Dvir, 1976.

5. There are a few other minor references to prayer elsewhere in *Kuzari*, all of which are cited and discussed in chapter five of the present volume (in the section on Halevi and Rambam).

acquires the World to Come. The more good deeds he does, the higher his level will be in the World to Come.

But he does long for this: to reach the level of Enoch, of whom it was said, "Enoch walked with God" (Genesis 5:24), or the level of Elijah of blessed memory,<sup>6</sup> and to isolate himself so that his only company will be with the angels. He would not suffer solitude and loneliness, because they would be his comrades. Instead, he would suffer among people, because they would keep him from his vision of the kingdom of heaven, which does not require food or drink. Complete isolation is fitting for such people. They are eager even for death because they have already reached the ultimate goal, after which there is no higher level they can hope to achieve.

Wise philosophers also love isolation, so that their minds will be clear and their reason will guide them to correct conclusions, ultimately leading them to the truth about all the matters for which they are still in doubt. Nevertheless, they still want contact with students who motivate them towards further investigation and better retention. (Just as a person who is completely devoted<sup>7</sup> to making money only wants to be involved with people he can do business with and profit from.) This is the level of Socrates and those like him. But today<sup>8</sup> there is no hope to reach the level of these rare individuals.<sup>9</sup>

But when the Divine Presence was present in the Holy Land among the nation which is fit for prophecy, people would isolate themselves and dwell in the deserts, living only among those who were like themselves, but not being utterly alone. Rather, they would help each other understand the wisdom of the Torah, and in doing the acts that draw one to that high level<sup>10</sup> in holiness and purity. These were the "disciples of the prophets" (2 Kings 2:3,5).

But at this time and in this place, when "prophecy is not widespread" (cf. 1 Samuel 3:1), when there is little acquired wisdom<sup>11</sup> and no innate wisdom,<sup>12</sup> whoever isolates himself has brought himself torture, and spiritual and physical sickness. He will be visibly weak with illness, but people will think that it is the melancholy of subjugation to God and humility. He will become imprisoned,<sup>13</sup> hating his life because he despises his deprivations and pains, not because he cherishes isolation.

How could it be otherwise? He does not cling to the Divine light, finding company in it as the prophets did. Nor has he attained the wisdoms that

6. "And Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind" (2 Kings 2:11).

7. This is what Ibn Tibbon means by *shaga* here; cf. Proverbs 5:11 and 20:1.

8. Following Zifroni.

9. Neither the levels of Enoch and Elijah, nor the level of Socrates.

10. Prophecy.

11. I.e., prophecy.

12. I.e., philosophical knowledge.

13. Because his ascetic life is a painful burden to him. Misery was the price he paid for rejecting worldly matters, but he did not find the solace in the joy of communion with the Divine either.

content those who study them, such that he would find satisfaction in them for the rest of his life like the philosophers.

I grant that such a man is God-fearing and a *hasid*, who loves to commune with his God in isolation, standing in supplication and prayer with all of the supplications and petitions that he knows. But these new prayers—they only satisfy him for a short time while they are still fresh. The more they become familiar to his tongue, the less his soul is stirred by them and through them he will feel neither subjugation to God nor God's favor.

Thus he will remain day and night while his very being demands its natural needs from him: Listening, seeing, speech, inquiry, activity, eating, drinking, sexual relations, monetary profit, the betterment of his household, helping the poor, and supporting the Torah with his wealth when something needs to be remedied. He will regret what he has devoted himself to, and his regret will further remove him from the Divine, toward which he strove to draw near.

2. Said the Khazar: If so, tell me how a *hasid* among you *does* act nowadays.

3. Said the Scholar: The *hasid* is one who is obeyed by his nation. He evaluates the sustenance and requirements needed by all its people, and divides it among them. He deals with them justly, not abusing any of them, and not giving any one more than his fair share. When he has need of them they will heed him, rushing to answer him when he calls. Let him command them and they will do as he orders, let him admonish them and they will comply.

4. Said the Khazar: I asked you about a *hasid*, not a ruler!

5. Said the Scholar: The *hasid* is one who rules. He is obeyed by his senses and forces of passion, and he administers the person, as it is said, "[Better . . . ] to have self control than to conquer a city" (Proverbs 16:32). He is suitable to govern, because were he the ruler of a nation he would administer it justly, as he administers his body and spirit, reigning in the passions and preventing them from burgeoning after he has given them their due, and provided what they need to be satisfied: enough food and drink in a moderate way, and bathing and similar things, also in a moderate way. He also reigns in the furious cravings for mastery,<sup>14</sup> after giving them their share of beneficial triumph in matters of wisdom and opinions, and rebuking evildoers. He gives his faculties of sense their due in ways that serve him, using his hands and feet and tongue when needed, and for

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14. *Kohot ka'asaniyyim* is a highly ambiguous term. In his note to his translation of the phrase, Even Shmuel points out that while the Arabic original indicates "mastery" (or the desire for it), he translated "anger" following the standard Ibn Tibbon translation, supposing that Ibn Tibbon had used an Arabic version with that meaning.

However, "anger" simply doesn't fit the contexts in which this term appears. I have translated according to its use in context, and suggest that even Ibn Tibbon may have meant something slightly different than "anger" by *ka'as*.



beneficial desires. Similarly for hearing and sight, and the “general sense”<sup>15</sup> follows them. Then imagination and notion and thought and memory, and then the force of desire which makes use of all of these—they all serve the will of the intellect. He does not allow any one of these powers or physical appendages to burgeon in its own attributes and lessen the others.

And once he has dealt with the needs of every one of them, giving the earthy ones what they need in terms of rest and sleep, and the constructive ones what they need in terms of stimulation and activity in worldly matters, then he calls to his assembly—as a ruler who is obeyed calls to his forces, that are ready to assist him—to cleave to the level even higher than it; I refer to level of the Divine, which is higher than the level of the intellect.

So he arranges his assembly and establishes it, in much the same way as Moses of blessed memory arranged his assembly around Mount Sinai.<sup>16</sup> He orders the force of desire to accept and keep whatever orders it receives, and do it at its proper time, using the abilities and physical appendages as it is commanded without disobeying. He commands it not to turn to false thoughts or images, not to accept them and not to believe in them until consulting with the intellect. If it [the intellect] allows them, let it [the force of desire] accept them, and if it does not—let it disregard them. Let desire accept this from it [the intellect] and agree to do it.

He directs the vessels of thought and turns them away from whatever worldly thoughts previously occupied them. He commands the imagination to bring forth the most glorious forms it can with the help of memory, in order to liken the sought after Divine to them. For instance: The revelation at Mount Sinai, the experience of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah, and like the Tabernacle of Moses, and the order of the service and the descent of [God’s] glory in the Temple, and many other things. He commands the memory to keep this and not forget it, warning thought and its illusions not to confuse the truth and bring it into doubt. He warns mastery and yearning not to influence the will, to disturb and burden it with whatever rage or desire they have.

After this counsel the force of will directs all the physical appendages, who serve it with zeal, enthusiasm, and joy. They will stand without being lazy when it is time to stand, bow when he commands them to bow, and sit when it is time to sit. The eyes gaze as a slave gazes at his master, the hands cease their doings and do not clasp one another. The legs stand side-by-side, and all the limbs stand ready in trepidation and fear to do the will of their leader. They do not sense pain or want should they have any.

The tongue should agree with thought, adding nothing, so that one will not utter his prayer through habit and routine like a starling or a parrot. Rather, with every single word must be its thought and intention.

15. Halevi briefly explains the “general sense” in 5:12. As the commentaries point out, “general sense” seems to mean the image of an object built out of the information brought by all of the senses combined. Also see 5:12 for further elaboration on all of the human “powers” that Halevi mentions here.

16. See the *Mekhilta* cited by Rashi on Exodus 19:24.

That moment becomes the heart of his time and its fruit, all his other moments becoming like paths leading to that moment. He will desire to be near it, because during it he resembles the spiritual and is far from the animal. The fruit of his day and night are those three times of prayer, and the fruit of his week is the Sabbath, because it is equipped for cleaving to the Divine. His service is with joy, not subjugation, as was explained.

This system regarding the soul is just like food for the body: He prays for his soul and takes sustenance for his body, and the blessing of one prayer suffices until the next prayer just like the vigour provided by the meal of the day sustains him until he eats at night.

The further the soul is from the time of prayer, the more it darkens because of whatever worldly matters it is confronted by. All the more so if one is forced to be in the company of children and women or evildoers, hearing what sullies his soul's purity, disgraceful things and melodies that turn the soul toward them, which he will not be able to resist. But at the time of prayer he purifies his soul from everything previous that happened, and mends it for the future.

But a week cannot go by in this way, with his mending his soul and body, without dark excesses having accumulated during the long week, which are impossible to purify and clean without a full day's continuous service [of God] while the body rests. Then the body will make up whatever it lost during the six days [of the week] on the Sabbath, and will be ready for the future. Similarly, the soul will recover what it lost through the body's exertions, as if it recovers from a previous illness on that day and now prepares itself with whatever will prevent that illness in the future. This is like what Job did every week regarding his children, as he said, "Perhaps my children have sinned" (1:5).<sup>17</sup>

Then he makes himself ready for the monthly healing,<sup>18</sup> which is "a time of cleansing for all that took place in them," meaning what took place in the months and the new events of their days, as it says, "For you do not know what the day will bring" (Proverbs 27:1).<sup>19</sup>

Then he readies himself for the three pilgrimage festivals,<sup>20</sup> and then for the great fast<sup>21</sup> on which he is cleansed for any previous sin. Through it he reaches what he lost in the previous days, weeks, and months, and the soul is cleansed from the confusions wrought by thought, the craving for mastery, and desire. He fully repents of turning toward them, whether in thought or in action. If repentance for thoughts is impossible because of the

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17. Job, in his great piety, had a weekly series of sacrifices, one for each of his sons, to atone for any possible sins by them (Job 1:1-5). Halevi considers this a precursor of weekly spiritual "cleansing" on the Sabbath.

18. Halevi refers to *Rosh Hodesh*, the first day of the new lunar month, which is a time of atonement.

19. What Halevi means is that the verb *yalad* can mean the events of a day, as it does in Proverbs 27:1. So too is *Rosh Hodesh* called a monthly time of cleansing for whatever took place during the days of the month.

20. Pesah, Shavuot, and Sukkot.

21. Meaning Yom Kippur.

force of images on the soul from memories of what he heard previously in his youth: poems and riddles and other things—it will at least be cleansed in deeds, and confess about those thoughts, making a commitment not to mention them with his tongue, all the more so not to actually follow them. As it says: “I determined that my mouth should not transgress” (Psalms 17:3).

His fast on that day is a fast that brings him close to resembling the angels, because he completes it with submissiveness and humility, with standing and bowing, with praises and glorification. All his physical powers deny their natural needs and occupy themselves with Torah matters, as if they had no animal nature.

This is how fasting should be every time he fasts. In it he should deny sight and hearing and speech, not burdening them with anything but that which will bring him close to God; and similarly for the inner powers of imagination and thought and others beside them. And together with this should be the well-known good deeds.<sup>22</sup>

[Sections 6–12 are not about prayer.]

13. Said the Scholar: What adds even more pleasure for him,<sup>23</sup> is saying a blessing over everything he finds in the world, and whatever happens to him in it.

14. Said the Khazar: How could this be? The blessings are an extra burden!

15. Said the Scholar: Shouldn't it be said of a perfect man, that he enjoys what he eats and drinks more than an infant or an animal? Just as an animal is more fit for enjoyment than a plant, even though the plant is continually nourished!

16. Said the Khazar: This is true for the advantage of perception and feeling pleasure. For if everything he desired of food and drink would be brought to a drunkard, while he was completely drunk, and he would listen to music and be with his friends, and the woman that he loves would hold him, and all of this would be told to him when he recovers from his drunkenness—he would feel grief over it and consider all of it a loss and not a gain, because all of these things came to him when he was not in a state to perceive and take pleasure in them.

17. Said the Scholar: Readiness to perceive pleasure is to think about how it was previously absent; this doubles the pleasure. This is one purpose of the blessings for a person who continually says them with *kavvana* and understanding.<sup>24</sup> For they portray the specific pleasure in the soul, and the

22. Halevi describes what these deeds are in the coming sections, which we will not cite here because they do not discuss prayer. He means things like circumcision, the Sabbath, sacrifices, tithes, pilgrimage festivals, and many others.

23. Referring to the *hasid*.

24. Following Zifroni. Ibn Tibbon has *hakhana* (“preparation”) instead of “understanding.”

praise for He who graciously granted it. Now a person was already set for it to be absent, and this enlarges his joy in it.

As when you say, "Who has kept us alive and preserved us"—since you could easily have died you thank Him for keeping you alive, and view it as a gain. Disease and death will be easier for you to bear when they come, because you already thought to yourself and saw that you have gained through your Creator. For it would only have been fitting for you to lack anything good, since you are but dust, but He has been good to you, giving you life and various pleasures. You will give thanks for this, and when He takes them away from you, you will serve Him by giving thanks, and you will say, "The Lord has given, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). Thus you will have pleasure all your life.

Do not think that a person who does not follow this has human pleasure; rather, he has animal pleasure which he does not understand, as we said about the drunkard.

Similarly, the *hasid* contemplates the idea of every blessing, understanding its intention and whatever relates to it. In [the blessing] *Yotzer ha-Me'orot*<sup>25</sup> he imagines the celestial order and the immensity of its components, and their important functions; but that compared to their Creator they are like the smallest crawling creature, even if they are huge in our eyes because they are so beneficial.

The proof that they are as I said—when compared to God—is proven by the fact that His wisdom and direction in creating the ant or the bee is no less than His wisdom or direction for the sun and its sphere.<sup>26</sup> But the signs of God's wisdom and providence are more subtle and wonderful in the ant and the bee in that their powers and vessels are set within them despite their small size. A person should think about this so that the luminaries do not seem too great to him, such that Satan will tempt him with some of the ideas of people who believe in their effects, and he will think that they help or hurt of their own volition. This is not true; rather, [they affect] through their qualities, like wind and fire. It is as it says, "If ever I saw the light shining. . . . And I secretly succumbed . . ." (Job 31:26–27).<sup>27</sup>

25. "Creator of the Luminaries."

26. If the heavenly bodies are considered to revolve around the earth, each is thought of as being within its own revolving "sphere": the sphere of the sun, of the moon, of the stars, and of the various planets.

27. To understand the meaning of Halevi's citation, the full context is as follows (vv. 26–28):

"If ever I saw the light shining,  
The moon on its course in full glory,  
And I secretly succumbed,  
And my hand touched my mouth in a kiss,  
That, too, would have been a criminal offense,  
For I would have denied God above."

In [the blessing] *Ahavat Olam*<sup>28</sup> he considers how the Divine cleaves to the assembly prepared to receive it<sup>29</sup> as light cleaves to a clear mirror, that the Torah from Him is the beginning of His desire to reveal His kingdom on earth as it is seen in heaven. The Divine Wisdom did not determine that angels be created on earth, but men from seed and blood in whom various dispositions contest and traits combat [one another] in accordance with changes in good or bad fortune, as is explained in *Sefer Yetzira*. When an individual or nation become pure regarding them, the Divine light touches them and leads them with wonders and awesome events outside of the natural order. This is called "love" and "joy" from God. The Divine found no receptacle (below the luminaries and spheres) other than the pious men who obey His word and cleave to the order He commanded. They were individuals from Adam until Jacob, then became a nation, and then the Divine touched them out of love, "to be their God" (Leviticus 26:45). And He arranged them in the desert according to the order of the spheres, four banners corresponding to the four quarters of the sphere, and twelve tribes corresponding to the twelve signs of the Zodiac. The camp of the Levites was in the center of the other camps, as it says in *Sefer Yetzira*: "The holy tabernacle is positioned in the center and He carries them all."<sup>30</sup> All of this shows love, and one should praise [God] for it.

After this<sup>31</sup> he should accept the Torah in the reading of *Shema*, and then with what *Emet ve-Yatziv*<sup>32</sup> includes about ideas motivating acceptance of the Torah, as if after what was said before became clear to him and he understood and recognized it, he took an oath upon himself and brought witnesses to the fact that he accepted it as the patriarchs did before him, and that his children will accept them forever. As it says, "For our fathers and for ourselves, for our children throughout our generations, it is a good and firm thing, a law that will never expire."<sup>33</sup>

Then he sets out the principles<sup>34</sup> making up the Jewish faith, namely: To acknowledge that He, may be blessed, is God; His eternity<sup>35</sup> and providence over our fathers; that the Torah is from Him; and the proof of all this, which is the closing [of the blessing], about the Exodus from Egypt. As it says, "It is true that You are the Lord our God. . . . It is true that Your name is since eternity. . . . And [You were] the Help of our fathers. . . .

28. "Eternal Love."

29. I.e., Israel.

30. *Sefer Yetzira* 2:3.

31. I.e., after the two blessings previously discussed, *Yotzer ha-Meorot* and *Ahavat Olam*.

32. "True and Sure," the beginning of the morning blessing after the reading of *Shema*.

33. From the blessing *Emet ve-Yatziv*.

34. This is how the commentaries explain the strange term *kesher* in Ibn Tibbon's translation. The Arabic original also means "principle."

35. *Kadmuto* specifically means that He is eternally ancient, that there was nothing before Him.

And it is true that You redeemed them from Egypt, Lord our God." Whoever finishes all of this with complete *kavvana* is a true Israelite, who may fittingly expect to cleave to the Divine that clings to Israel alone of all the nations.<sup>36</sup> He may stand easily before the Divine Presence; when he asks he will be answered.

And he must join the blessing of redemption<sup>37</sup> to prayer<sup>38</sup> out of intense zeal and enthusiasm, as we said earlier, and then stand for prayer the way we described earlier, with blessings that are inclusive of all Israel. For supplication and prayer for individual concerns are only optional, and they<sup>39</sup> made a place for this in *Shomea Tefilla*<sup>40</sup> for whoever wants to.

In the first blessing called *Avot*<sup>41</sup> he should keep the eminence of the patriarchs in mind: that God's covenant with them endures forever, and will never be abrogated, as it says, "and Who will bring a redeemer to their children's children."

In the second blessing called *Gevurot*<sup>42</sup> [he should keep in mind] that God rules this world continually, not as the natural philosophers think, that it is according to the natural laws they have tested. He should keep in mind that He will revive the dead at the time which suits Him, even if this is far from the reasoning of the natural philosophers. Similarly for "He brings the rain" and other phrases. And "He frees those who are imprisoned" according to His will, and other similar things. This is made clear by the experiences of the children of Israel.

After he expresses the faith in *Avot* and *Gevurot*, which suppose that God has a connection to this physical world, let Him exalt Him and proclaim His holiness and glorify Him [beyond] His being apprehended by or connected to any physical description in [the blessing about] God's holiness, which is *Atta Kadosh*.<sup>43</sup> For this blessing he should keep in mind everything the philosophers describe about [God's] holiness and exaltedness, after he has already confirmed His Divinity and Kingship in *Avot* and *Gevurot*. For in them it elucidated to us that we have a Ruler and Lawgiver, and if not for them we would carry the doubts of the philosophers who believe the world is from eternity.<sup>44</sup> So he must preface *Avot* and *Gevurot* to *Kedushat*

36. Some editions read "idolatrous nations" out of fear of gentile censors.

37. *Ge'ula*, the blessing immediately before the *Amida*, ending with the words *ga'al yisrael* ("Who redeemed Israel"). No interruption is allowed after saying this blessing before the *Amida*. This is what it means for the two to be "joined."

38. I.e., the *Amida*.

39. *Hazal*.

40. "Who hears prayer"—the last of the *Amida*'s thirteen petitions, which is a general plea for God to answer all prayers. We discussed the idea of adding petitions at length in chapter eight of the present volume.

41. "Fathers" or "patriarchs."

42. "Might."

43. "You are holy," the third blessing of the *Amida*.

44. Much of classical philosophy has it that the world is eternally old, never having been created at one point by God. Nor does God, because of His nature, have anything at all to do with the physical world on a conscious level.

*ha-Shem*.<sup>45</sup>

After proclaiming His holiness and exalting Him through this, he begins petitioning for his needs among those of all Israel. He must not disregard this, for the only prayer that is answered is for the congregation or together with the congregation, or of an individual who takes the place of the congregation.<sup>46</sup> But such a person does not exist in this era of ours.

18. Said the Khazar: Why is this true? Is it not better for a person to seclude himself, so that his soul will be more pure and his mind will be more clear?

19. Said the Scholar: However, there are several advantages to the congregation. One is that the congregation will not pray for something that may injure an individual, but an individual may very well pray for something that might injure other individuals. And of those individuals, there might be someone who prays for something injurious to him. But a condition for prayer to be answered is that it be for something that benefits the world, not that will harm it in any way.

Another of them is that an individual's prayer is rarely perfect, without any deficiency from error or negligence. Because of this they instituted that individuals must pray the community's prayer, and that his prayer must be together with the community (as far as possible with at least ten) so that some of them will complete what others of them lack through error or negligence. Thus a perfect prayer with pure *kavvana* becomes possible through all of them, and blessing will befall all of them, with every individual's share reaching him.

For the Divine is like rain which waters a land if that country is worthy of it overall, and it may even include some individuals who are unworthy and who will prosper through the majority. As well as the opposite: rain may be kept from a land if the country is not worthy of it overall, and it may even include some individuals who were worthy of it and to whom it is prevented because of the majority. These are God's laws of the world. God keeps the reward for those individuals in the World to Come, and even in this world He grants them some good replacement and they will benefit from some good that distinguishes them from their countrymen. But it is not enough to completely save them from the general punishment.

A person who prays for his own needs may be compared to a person who wants to secure his own house alone, but does not want to work with the people of the province when they seek aid in fortifying their wall.<sup>47</sup> He goes to great expense but remains in danger. But a person who joins in with what the community does expends little and remains secure, for what one is not able to do will be completed by another. [This way] the province will reach its maximum capabilities, and all of its people will enjoy its blessing by expending little, according to the law and with mutual agreement.

45. Another name for the third blessing, *Atta Kadosh*.

46. I.e., someone whose merit is so great that it is equivalent to the entire people's.

47. I.e., the walls of the city for its defense.

This is why Plato called what a person expends according to law “the public assets.” When an individual is indifferent to “the public assets”—which are for the good of the community of which he is a part—thinking to keep it for himself, he sins toward the “public” and even more toward himself. For the individual is to the community what one limb is to the whole body. If the arm were to be uncompromising about its blood when it needs letting, the entire body would suffer from this, and the arm would suffer along with it.

Rather, it is right for a person to suffer pain, even death, for the public good. It is crucial for an individual to carefully consider the public assets, to give it and not to be indifferent to it. But since this<sup>48</sup> was not something that reason could determine, the Creator specifically legislated tithes and gifts<sup>49</sup> and sacrifices and other things—this is the public asset of money. But of deeds: Sabbaths and festivals and Sabbatical years and Jubilee years, and other similar things. And of speech: Prayers and blessings and praises. And of character traits: love and fear [of God], and joy.

Of the petitions it is fitting to begin with the request for intelligence and knowledge, through which a person achieves closeness to his God. This is why *Honen ha-Da'at*<sup>50</sup> is first, near what follows it (I mean *Ha-Rotze Bitshuvah*),<sup>51</sup> so that such wisdom and knowledge and understanding will be according to the path of Torah and the service of God. As it says,<sup>52</sup> “Return us to Your Torah, our Father, and draw us to Your service, our King.”

But since no person can be without sin or wrongdoing, one must pray for forgiveness of the sin (in thought or in deed) in the blessing of *Hanun ha-Marbeh Liso'ah*.<sup>53</sup> He follows the blessing with the result of this forgiveness, namely redemption from the situation we are in. So he begins with “See our afflictions” and concludes with “Redeemer of Israel.”

After this he prays for the well-being of people's bodies and lives, following this prayer with [another for the] availability of sustenance to preserve their strength in *Birkat ha-Shanim*.<sup>54</sup>

Then he prays for the ingathering of the exiles in *mekabetz nidhei ammo Yisrael*.<sup>55</sup> He follows this with [a prayer for] the advent of justice and enhancing [Israel's] condition<sup>56</sup> when he says “Rule over us, You alone, O Lord.”

48. The amount a person “owes” to the public.

49. To the *kohanim* and for the Temple.

50. “He who grants knowledge.”

51. “Who is pleased by penitence.”

52. In the second petitionary blessing mentioned here.

53. “The compassionate One, who generously forgives.”

54. “The blessing of the years,” i.e., a prayer that the year be one of plenty, especially in terms of agriculture.

55. “Who gathers the dispersed of His people Israel.”

56. This follows an emendation by Zifroni and Hirschfeld. The standard printings have “and attachment to the Divine.” Even Shmuel translates “and restoring justice to its position.”



Then he prays for the [Israel's] dross, its intentional sinners, to be destroyed in *Birkat ha-Minim*,<sup>57</sup> following it with [a prayer for] the protection of exceptionally pure individuals when he says "For the righteous and the pious. . . ."

Then he prays for [God to] return Jerusalem's captives and to make it the place of His Presence, following this with a prayer for the Messiah, son of David, thus concluding the worldly needs.

Then he prays for the acceptance of the prayers in *Shomea Tefilla*.<sup>58</sup> He follows this by praying to be shown the Divine Presence with his very eyes<sup>59</sup>—as it was for the prophets and the pious and those who left Egypt—when he says, "Let our eyes see Your return to Zion." And he concludes, "Who returns His Presence to Zion." He should envision the Divine Presence standing before him and bow before it, as Israel would bow when they actually saw it. He then bows for *Modim*<sup>60</sup> in the blessing of thanks,<sup>61</sup> which includes both acknowledgement of God's good and praise for it.

This he follows with *Oseh Shalom*<sup>62</sup> which is the final conclusion, so that he may take leave of the Divine Presence in peace.

20. The Khazar said: I have no question left, for I see that all these matters are correctly and properly arranged. Regarding the only thing I would have asked you about—why I see so little mention of the World to Come in your prayers—you have already answered me about it. For whoever prays to cleave to the Divine light during his life, praying even to see it with his own eyes, and praying for the level of prophecy than which there is no greater closeness of man to God—he has undoubtedly prayed for that which is greater than the World to Come. If it reaches him then he will reach the World to Come, for whoever's soul cleaved to the Divine while it was [still] burdened with physical accidents and pain—all the more so will it cleave to Him when it is alone with Him, having left these coarse vessels.

21. Said the Scholar: I will make this clearer to you through a parable of a man who came to the king. The king brought him very close, giving him permission to come to him any time he wanted. He became so familiar with the king that he would ask to come to his palace and be present at his feasts, and he would grant it. The king would send his most important nobles to him,<sup>63</sup> doing for him what he would not do for any other person.

When this man sinned against the king, whether unintentionally or intentionally and the king withdrew from him, he would not ask or plead

57. "The blessing about heretics."

58. "Who hears prayer."

59. Cf. Isaiah 52:8; "For every eye shall behold the Lord's return to Zion."

60. "We are grateful to You. . . ."

61. Ibn Tibbon may be referring to the law that one bows twice during this blessing: at the first word *Modim*, and at the concluding blessing of thanks (commentary *Otzar Nehmad*). In any case, Ibn Tibbon's language is confusing.

62. "Who makes peace."

63. Presumably, to escort the man to the king's feast.

for anything other than to return to his custom of visiting the king, and that he not keep his nobles from visiting him.

But all the other people of the country would only beseech the king when they went on long journeys, that the king send someone along with them to protect them from bandits and wild animals and other dangers of the journey. They trusted the king to do their will regarding this, to oversee them while they travelled even though he did not oversee them while they were within the city. Each of them would show off to his comrade that the king oversees him more closely than anyone else because of the way he describes him, exalting the king more than anyone else.

This man was a stranger who did not know the way of the journey, but he did not ask for anyone to escort him. When it came time for him to leave, the people of the city warned him: "Know that you will die on this dangerous journey, because you have no one to escort you!"

He replied to them: "Who escorts you?"

They said: "The king! We beseeched him, asking him to provide escorts ever since we came to this city. But we have never seen you ask for this."

He replied to them: "Fools! Whoever cried out to the king when he was secure—should he not hope for him at a time of danger, even without opening his mouth about it? And he, who answered him at a time of tranquillity, would it not befit him even more to answer him in a time of trouble?"

"And if you say that he would answer you because you exalt him, is there any one of you who has accepted his service as I have? Anyone who exalts him as I do? Who has borne pain to keep his commandments as I have? Who keeps away from impurity when mentioning his name as I have? Or anyone who has given honor to his name and his law as I have? And everything I have done has been according to its command and study!"

"You honor him according to your ideas and considerations and do not lose your reward. So how could he abandon me on my journey, just because I didn't actually speak of my need as you did, since I trusted in his righteousness?"

This parable is only for a person who stubbornly refuses to accept the words of our rabbis. But regardless, our prayers are full of references to the World to Come. And the words of our rabbis that they received from the prophets are full of descriptions of the Garden of Eden and Gehinnom, as I explained to you.<sup>64</sup>

I have thus explained to you what a *hasid* does in our present era. So imagine how it was at that fortunate time<sup>65</sup> in the Divine place<sup>66</sup> and among those people whose roots are Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and carry their special essence. It was their nature to be modest, men and women with no evil on their tongues. The *hasid* would become pure among them;

64. In Part One, sect. 115.

65. When the Temple stood.

66. Jerusalem.

his soul would not be sullied by hearing any foul words from them. His body and clothing would not carry impurities from bodily emissions, menstruation, carcasses, corpses, leprosy, or others—because the people cleaved to holiness and purity.

All the more so for a person who dwelled in the city of the Divine Presence, who only encountered classes of people on high levels of holiness: *kohanim*, Levites, nazirites, sages, judges, and officials; or who sees the masses celebrate with sounds of joy and thanks during the “three times of the year.”<sup>67</sup> He hears nothing but God’s song and sees nothing but God’s work. All the more so if he is a *kohen* or Levite living on “God’s bread” and standing in “God’s house” since his youth like Samuel,<sup>68</sup> not needing to procure sustenance but doing God’s service all the days of his life. What do you think of what he does, his purity of soul and perfect deeds?

22. The Khazar said: This is the ultimate level, after which there is nothing but the level of the angels. It makes sense that people hope for prophecy with such ability to receive it, all the more so where the Divine Presence is found. This is how service that does not require seclusion and asceticism should be.

### QUESTIONS ON “THE WAY OF THE HASID”

1. How does asceticism backfire?
2. Which aspects of a human being *harm* prayer if they are not properly dealt with? Which ones make positive contributions to the experience of prayer?
3. Does the idea that prayer serves exactly the same purpose as holy days seem correct? Why or why not? Which other authorities would disagree with Halevi on this point?
4. The blessings help a person appreciate God’s gifts. How does this fit into the “rational” school of thought on prayer?
5. Which aspect of a human being plays the largest role in *all* of Halevi’s guidelines for saying the blessings: the intellect, the imagination, or the force of desire?
6. On the Khazar’s point (section 18) that private prayer in seclusion seems preferable to public prayer. Do you think Rabbenu Bahya (reading 2) would have or could have answered the question the same way Halevi did? Why? If not, what might he have said otherwise?
7. How does Halevi go further than the strict halakha in his promotion of public prayer? Why do you think he does this?
8. Can you trace a logical sequence through *all* the blessings of the *Amida* according to Halevi’s presentation?

67. *Pesah*, *Shavuot*, and *Sukkot*.

68. See 1 Samuel 1–2.

9. Halevi never explicitly wrote what the parable (in 21) stands for. Who are the king, the man, and the people of the city in reality? What does the journey symbolize?
10. How does "The Way of the *Hasid*" return to the very first point it began with at its very end?



## Reading 4. Rambam on Prayer

### *Moreh ha-Nevukhim* / The Guide to the Perplexed

#### INTRODUCTION

The following are the chapters of *Moreh ha-Nevukhim* ("The Guide to the Perplexed") in which Rambam deals with prayer. But as we said in chapter five on "Going Beyond Simple Prayer," the *Moreh* only represents one side of Rambam's approach to prayer. What you read here should be supplemented by the kind of ideas Rambam expressed in *Hilkhot Tefilla* ("The Laws of Prayer" in *Mishneh Torah*), and similar attitudes in his other halakhic writings (for references, see chapter five note 54).

The *Moreh* was a popular work that was widely studied in Europe and the Middle East during the Middle Ages, as we mentioned in chapter five. But since Rambam wrote it in Arabic, it mostly became known and loved to the Jewish people in a "secondary vessel" through the brilliant Hebrew translation of Rabbi Shemuel Ibn Tibbon. This translation is not only clear and cogent, but to a certain degree it involved the creation of an entire vocabulary for scientific and philosophic terms in Hebrew, for which words were previously nonexistent. The Hebrew terms coined by Ibn Tibbon became the currency of medieval Jewish philosophy after Rambam's time. This was especially so for the great commentaries on the *Moreh*, which were mostly based on Ibn Tibbon's translation. The *Moreh's* true impact on intellectual Jewish history cannot be understood without reference to the Ibn Tibbon translation and the commentaries on it.

The following text attempts to preserve the spirit and flavor of the Ibn Tibbon translation as it was understood by the medieval commentaries. There can be no substitute, of course, for the Arabic original, and so I checked this text against modern translations from that original (especially the Hebrew translation of Rabbi Yosef Kafih) to make sure that there were no major discrepancies. But what follows is essentially meant to reflect Ibn

Tibbon's understanding of the text. When Ibn Tibbon himself is unclear I relied on how the commentaries understood him, and translated accordingly.

The commentaries, of course, sometimes go far beyond Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew text as they explain what Rambam meant in deeper terms or take issue with him (or with each other!). I picked a few of their more exciting comments for use within the study questions following each chapter.

## Prayer in *Moreh ha-Nevukhim*: Text

### PART ONE, CHAPTER 59

One may very well ask: Since there is no way to know God's true essence, and it has been conclusively proven that the only thing it is possible to know is that He exists, but positive descriptions are impossible, as has been conclusively shown—then what advantage is gained by those who achieve philosophic understanding? If so, what Moses our teacher of blessed memory understood, and Solomon, is the same thing any minor seeker of wisdom will find. Is there nothing more than this?

But it is well-known to Torah scholars and also to the philosophers that the advantage in this is great. Know that it is true: that the advantage gained by those who achieve philosophic understanding is enormous. For just as the more attributes one adds to what he describes, it will become more specific, and the one describing it will be closer to understanding its true essence, so too, the more attributes you deny to God the closer you will be to understanding [Him]. You will be closer to Him than someone who has not negated those things whose unsuitability has already been proven conclusively to you.

A person may strive to understand one wisdom and show the truth of its premises for many years before acquiring it as truth, even if the entire result of that knowledge is to deny one idea to God, knowing with certainty that it is a lie to ascribe that idea to Him. But for another, a person who does not investigate things in depth, this will not be proven to him with certainty, and he will remain in doubt about it. And yet another, who is entirely blind, will positively accept the truth of this very idea whose falsehood has been shown.

For instance, I will conclusively prove that God is incorporeal;<sup>1</sup> but another will remain uncertain and not know for certain whether He has physical properties or not; and yet another will positively conclude that He is corporeal, and will approach God with this belief. See how little these three have in common, compared to what divides them! The first one is

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1. Part two, chapter 1.

definitely closest to God, the second is far from Him, and the third is even further.

If we suggest yet a fourth person, to whom it has been conclusively shown that God cannot be influenced, while the first (who has eliminated God's corporeality) still does not know this—the fourth is undoubtedly closer to God than the first, and so on. When we find a person to whom it has been proven that a great many things must not be attributed to God, things which to us it is possible to attribute to Him or may come from Him—that person would undoubtedly be more perfect than ourselves, all the more so if we positively believe these things to be true of Him.

It has already been proven to you that whenever you have been clearly shown that another idea must be negated in relation to God, you will be more perfect. And whenever you positively attribute something else to Him, you will be deluded and further from knowledge of His true essence. Therefore, people must draw near to comprehending Him with investigation and inquiry, until the falsehood of everything that is false about Him is proven. Do not attribute something to Him thinking that you thereby add something to Him, or that the idea is perfection in His constitution as it would be perfect in ours. Because the “perfections” that we understand are all just examples of acquired traits [but are not inherent to us],<sup>2</sup> and no trait can be possessed by any [human] being.<sup>3</sup> Know that when you ascribe something outside of Himself to Him, you will be removed from Him in two ways: First, because anything you might attribute to Him is our own kind of “perfection”; and second, because He does not “acquire” exterior traits. Rather, His essence is the same as His perfections, as we explained.<sup>4</sup>

When any person realizes that it is possible to know what we can [of God] only by negation, and negation cannot teach anything about the idea from which the thing we are negating has been negated, this makes clear to all men that God cannot be understood by other minds, and no one can know His essence except for He Himself, and “understanding” Him is actually detrimental to truly comprehending Him.

All the philosophers say: “We are overwhelmed by His glory, and He is hidden from us because His manifestation is so powerful, just as the sun cannot be seen by eyes that are too weak to look upon it.” They have discussed this at length, so there is no reason to discuss it here. The most superb thing that has been said about this matter is in the Psalms: “Silence is the praise that befits You” (65:2), which means that silence is the true praise of You.<sup>5</sup> This is a wonderful expression of the matter: That we, whatever we say about God with the intention of glorifying and praising

2. While God's traits, on the other hand, are not “acquired,” but are the same as His essence.

3. This last point is difficult to translate. The standard commentaries on the *Moreh* explain that no non-Divine being can have *every* trait in its complete perfection, because some of them are opposites and are mutually exclusive: one cannot, for instance, be completely merciful and completely cruel.

4. In part one of the *Moreh*, chapter 52.

5. Rambam finds it necessary to explain what the verse means because the word

Him, it will really be a disgrace relative to His true nature, and show some lack in Him. Therefore, it is more fitting to be silent and be content with what the intellect can know. As the men of perfection commanded when they said, "Ponder it in your hearts on your beds, and be silent" (Psalms 4:5).

You know the famous statement of our rabbis (If only all of the passages were like it!) which I will quote in full even though it is well known, in order to awaken you to its implications. They said (*Berakhot* 33b):

A person led the prayers before Rabbi Hanina and said: "The God who is great, mighty, and awesome, glorious and powerful, feared and strong!"<sup>6</sup> He said to him: Have you finished all the praises of your Master? Had not Moses our teacher said the first three praises in the Torah (Deuteronomy 10:17), and the Men of the Great Assembly come to incorporate them into prayer, we would not be allowed to say them. So how could you go and say all of this?

To what can this be compared? To a king of flesh and blood who had thousands of thousands of gold dinars, but people praise him for his silver! Isn't this an insult to him?!

That is the end of this pious man's statement.<sup>7</sup> First note how it silences the use of too many positive attributes and abhors them. And consider how it shows that we would never say any of the attributes nor speak of them if we were led by our reason alone. But man's need to speak forced the existence of some sort of image, as they said: "The Torah speaks in the language of Man" (*Berakhot* 31b),<sup>8</sup> such that God would be described to them according to their own ideas of perfection. Our job is to understand those passages correctly, and not to call His name by them except when we read them in the Torah. But when the Men of the Great Assembly, who were prophets, came and mentioned them in prayer, our job became to say only those.<sup>9</sup> The main point of this passage is to explain the two reasons that led us to use positive attributes in our prayers: first, because they are mentioned in the Torah; and second, because the prophets put them in our prayers. If not for the first reason we would never mention them. And if not

*dumiya* (which we have translated as "silence," following Rambam) is unclear. But the plain meaning of the verse seems to be: "Praise befits [*dumiya*] you."

6. Until "awesome" is the traditional text, but "glorious . . . strong" was added by this particular *sheli'ah tzibbur*.

7. Referring to Rabbi Hanina.

8. Rambam explained this rabbinic statement earlier in chapter 26: The Torah describes God in positive ways, but only so that the common people will know that He exists and He is perfect. The Torah spoke of God in "the language of man" for that reason alone, not because these "human" descriptions are accurate or even true when applied to God.

9. Only those attributes that they borrowed from the Torah to use in the prayers.



for the second reason, we would never remove them from their context and pray using them. So how could you<sup>10</sup> use many positive attributes!

Through these things it has been made clear to you that it is not fitting for us to pray with—or to say—all of the attributes pertaining to God in the books of the prophets. For he<sup>11</sup> did not say, “Had not Moses our teacher said them, we would be forbidden to say them.” His condition was different: “And the Men of the Great Assembly came and instituted them as part of *tefilla*”—only then was it permissible to pray with them. Unlike the true fools who avidly used praises have done, lengthening and multiplying their words in the prayers they composed and the expressions they gathered, in order to come close to God through them (according to their way of thinking). They describe God with attributes which, were they used to describe a human being, would be a deficiency in him. They did not understand these great and important matters, which are foreign to the thought of commoners. So they made God a doormat for their tongues, describing Him and telling of Him whatever way they saw fitting. They praised Him this way avidly, thinking thereby to arouse Him to action. All the more so if they found it written in the words of a prophet, they took it as permission to approach the scriptures (which anyway need to be interpreted) and explained them according to their plain sense, and cut phrases out of them and made them into sections and built compositions out of them. This leniency is widespread among poets and lyricists and whoever thinks he writes verse. Such that things have been composed, some of which are absolute heresy and some of which are full of foolishness and damaging illusion, things that a person would naturally laugh when he heard them but will cry over when he ponders them: How could these things have been said about God’s essence! Did I not pity the people who say these things, I would tell you a few of them so that you would become aware of the possibility of sin in them. But they are statements whose deficiency is very apparent to whoever understands.

You must ponder this and say: If evil speech and slander are terrible defiance [of God], then all the more so is loosening the tongue about God’s essence and describing Him with attributes though He is above them. I should not say that they are defiance, but unintentional blasphemy for the masses who listen to them and for the fool who says them. But I consider the person who discerns the deficiency of those compositions and nevertheless says them to be among those about whom it was said, “The Israelites said against the Lord their God things which were not right” (2 Kings 17:9) and it was said, “and to preach untruths against the Lord” (Isaiah 32:6). If you wish to be one of those who cares about the honor of his Creator, there is no need for you ever to hear them, much less to recite them, and certainly not to compose others like them. You are aware of the great measure of guilt incurred by someone who “casts his words toward heaven” (*Sukka* 53a, *Ta’anit* 25a), and there is no reason whatsoever for you

10. Referring to the man who led the prayers in the talmudic passage.

11. Rabbi Hanina, in the talmudic passage quoted above.

to start yourself with positive attributes to glorify God in your thoughts. Do not go beyond what the Men of the Great Assembly mentioned in the prayers and blessings. This is sufficient and more than sufficient, as Rabbi Hanina said. You may read whatever else appears in the books of the prophets when you come across it, but you must understand it as we have explained,<sup>12</sup> namely that they are descriptions of His actions or they are to negate their absence [in God]. This idea should also not be promulgated to the masses, but rather this type of investigation befits individuals for whom glorifying the Creator is not to say what is not fitting, but to comprehend what is appropriate.<sup>13</sup>

Let us return to finishing our point about Rabbi Hanina and his wisdoms. He did not say: "To what can this be compared? To a king of flesh and blood who had thousands of thousands of gold dinars, but people praise him for a hundred dinars!" which parable would have shown that God's perfections are more perfect than those that are attributed to Him, though they are of the same type. It is not so, as we proved conclusively. The wisdom of this parable was exhibited when he said, ". . . gold dinars, but people praise him for his silver!" which shows that whatever are perfections for us—they have nothing to do with God, and all of them would rather be deficiencies to His essence. As he said at the end of the parable: "Isn't that an insult to him?"

I taught you that whenever you think of Him with any of these attributes it is a deficiency in His essence, if it is a type applying to us. Solomon led us to this idea by saying that which is sufficient: "For God is in heaven and you are on earth; that is why your words should be few" (Ecclesiastes 5:1).

### QUESTIONS ON PART ONE, CHAPTER 59

1. Find two places in this chapter where Rambam hints that a person cannot "influence" God to give him what he wants by praying.
2. How did Rambam's ideas about avoiding praise influence his attitude toward *piyyutim* (liturgical poems)? If they are so wrong, then how does he explain why they are so popular?
3. In this chapter, Rambam wrote that the prayer text was composed by the Men of the Great Assembly, who counted prophets among their number. This origin was of great significance to him, as it was later to many Jewish mystics (see chapters five and eight of this book). In fact, many mystics eventually utilized this view of Rambam's for their own purposes. But what exactly was the significance of the authorship of the prayers for Rambam, and how was it entirely different from the significance that it held for mystics?
4. As we saw in chapter twelve of this book, Ibn Ezra quoted the same verse as Rambam concluded this chapter with (Ecclesiastes 5:1). He

12. See chapters 53 and 58.

13. I.e., to investigate only *negative* attributes but avoid saying positive ones.

also cited it in a polemic against liturgical poetry. But how did the two apply the verse in very different ways? Hint: Remember that Ibn Ezra himself *did* write liturgical poems, while Rambam did not. Also note that Rambam was only concerned with the second half of the verse. Why?

### PART THREE, CHAPTER 32

When you consider the Divine deeds (I mean the deeds in nature) it will become clear to you how great God's shrewdness and wisdom were in how He created living creatures, and in the stages of the movements of the limbs, and how certain ones are joined to others. God's wisdom and sage techniques will similarly become clear to you in the overall stages of man's components in all of their elements. An example of the stages of his movements and the adjacency of his organs is in the brain: What is at its front is very soft, while what is toward its back is denser, and the spinal cord is even harder; the more it extends the harder it gets. And the nerves are the vessels of sense and movement. Now, the nerves needed just for the senses, or for a small movement needing little effort like moving the eyelids or the jaw, derive from the brain. The nerves needed for moving the limbs emanate from the spinal cord. And when the nerves—even the ones emanating from the spinal cord—cannot move the limbs because of their delicacy, God employed the technique of having threads come out of the nerve, and those threads are filled with flesh becoming muscles. Afterward the nerve leaves the end of the sinew as it has begun to harden, strong pieces of cord mixing with it, becoming a tendon. The tendon adheres to the limb and is attached to it, and thus the nerve is then able to move the limb by these stages. I mentioned this one example to you because it is the most visible of the wonders explained in the book *On the Uses of the Parts of the Body of Man*,<sup>14</sup> all of which are shown and revealed to a person who thinks about them with a clear mind. God also employed the technique of having every creature of the species that wean to be, when it is born, extremely weak and unable to be nourished by dry food. Breasts were prepared for it producing milk, so that it could be nourished with moist food in accordance with the constitution of its limbs before they dry and harden one by one in stages.

Many things found in our Torah are similar to this very way of doing things by God, who is their administrator—namely, that it is impossible to suddenly go from one extreme to the other. For this reason it is impossible, according to man's nature, to suddenly abandon all that he is used to. When God sent Moses our Teacher to make us "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6) by knowing Him, as he explained when he said, "It

14. By Galen, the Greek physician (c. 130–200). Rambam first mentions this book and its author in part three, chapter 12.

has been clearly demonstrated to you. . . .<sup>15</sup> Know therefore this day and keep in mind . . .<sup>16</sup> (Deuteronomy 4:35, 39) and to be given over to His service, as it says, "and serving Him with all your heart" (ibid., 11:13) and it says, "You shall serve the Lord your God" (Exodus 23:25), and it says, "and serve none but Him" (Deuteronomy 13:5)—it was the widespread custom throughout the entire world, which all were then accustomed to, and the general "service" which they were raised according to, to sacrifice species of animals in the temples where they stood idols, and to bow to them and to burn incense before them. The devout men and ascetics at that time were the people appointed to serve in those temples to the stars (as we explained). God's great wisdom and shrewdness, which is revealed in all of His creations, did not conclude that He should command us to set aside all those types of service, to abandon them and abolish them. This would have been an idea that the mind could not entertain, because of the nature of man which always tends toward that which he is used to.

Back then, this would have been like a prophet coming in our times, calling for the service of God and saying: God commanded you not to pray to Him, and not to fast; and not to plead for His salvation during times of trouble, but instead let your service be in thought alone without action.

Because of this, God preserved those forms of worship but transferred them from being for created beings or untrue imaginary things to being in His name, and commanded us to do them for Him. And He commanded us to build Him a Temple: "And let them make Me a sanctuary" (Exodus 25:8), and for the altar to be in His name: "Make for Me an altar of earth" (ibid. 20:21), and for sacrifice to be to Him: "When any of you presents an offering to the Lord" (Leviticus 1:2), and for people to bow to Him and burn incense to Him. And He warned us not to do any of these things for another besides Him: "Whoever sacrifices to a god [other than the Lord alone] shall be proscribed" (Exodus 22:19), "for you must not worship any other god" (ibid. 34:14). And he separated the *kohanim* for service in the Temple, saying: "and they shall serve Me as priests" (ibid. 28:41). And he obligated that enough gifts be set aside for them to suffice them, because they are busy with the Temple and its sacrifices—these are gifts for the Levites and the *kohanim*. Through this technique, the Divine wisdom accomplished the removal of idolatry from the world and preserved the true great basis of our faith, namely the existence of God and His unity. And [at the same time] people did not have to be overwhelmed and astonished by the forms of worship they were used to, for which they knew no alternatives, being abolished.

I know that when you first think about it you will definitely shun this idea and it will hard for you [to accept], and in your heart you will ask me this: "How can clear, detailed commandments and warnings and great deeds, which were given exact times, all not be directed toward themselves,

15. The verse continues, "that the Lord alone is God. There is none beside Him."

16. The verse continues, "that the Lord alone is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other."

but be for something else, as if they were a crafty technique that God did in order for us to accomplish His primary intention? What would have prevented Him from commanding us to fulfil His primary intention and giving us the ability to accept it, and then there would have been no need for these [actions] which you think are for a secondary purpose?"

Listen to my answer, which will remove this sickness from your heart and reveal the truth of what I pointed out to you. For this very idea is found in the Torah when it says: "God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer. . . . So God led the people roundabout, by way of the wilderness at the Sea of Reeds" (Exodus 13:17-18). Exactly as God led them roundabout to another path, away from the straight path which was the original intention, for fear that they would not be able to endure it according to what is natural—so that the primary intention would be fulfilled; so did He command regarding this commandment we mentioned for fear of what a person cannot naturally accept, so that the primary intention would be achieved, that being awareness of God and setting aside idolatry.

For just as it is unnatural for a person to be raised on harsh labor at mortar and bricks and similar things, and afterward to wash his filth from his hands and suddenly wage war on the children of giants (see Numbers 13:28), so too it is against his nature to be raised on many kinds of worship and habitual actions, which people are so inclined to that they take them as assumptions, and suddenly abandon them all. Just as God was wise to lead them roundabout in the desert until they became mighty (as it is known that travelling in the desert with few bodily comforts such as washing and anointing produce might, while the opposite breeds tenderness) and men were born there who had never been accustomed to degradation and servitude, and all this was at the command of God through Moses, "On a sign from the Lord they made camp and on a sign from the Lord they broke camp; they observed the Lord's mandate at the Lord's bidding through Moses" (Numbers 9:23)—so too does this part of the Torah exhibit God's shrewdness that they remain with the familiar kind of activity, so that they will achieve the faith which is the primary intention.

And as far as your question: "What prevented God from commanding us to fulfil his primary intention and give us the ability to accept it?" This question forces another one, saying to you: "What prevented God from leading them by way of the land of the Philistines and giving them the ability to fight? And then there would have been no need for the roundabout journey with 'the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night' (Exodus 13:22)!"

And it forces yet a third question about the reason for the good predictions promised for keeping the commandments and the evil predictions promised for sins, namely: "Since God's primary intention and desire was that we believe in this Torah and do everything written in it, why did he not give us the ability to accept it and follow it always? Then He would not have employed a technique whereby He is good to us if we serve Him and he takes vengeance on us if we rebel against Him! Nor would He have made all those good promises, and penalties! This is also a technique God

used for us so that we might achieve the primary intention. But what would have prevented Him from giving us the will to do the kinds of service He desires and to make rejection of the sins He despises a tendency innate in us?"

The answer to all these three questions and all others like them is one general response, namely that although with all miracles, each involves a change in some being, God will not change the nature of man at all as a miracle. Because of this great principle He said, "May they always be of such a mind [to revere Me and follow all My commandments]" (Deuteronomy 5:26). Because of this there is such a thing as a commandment, a warning, and reward and punishment. We already proved this principle many places in our works. I did not say this because I believe that changing any person's nature would be difficult for God (on the contrary, it is possible and within [His] ability) but that He has no desire whatsoever to do this and He never will according to the principles of the Torah. For if it was His desire to change every person's nature to what God wants of that person, then this would annul sending the prophets and the entire giving of the Torah.

Let me return to my [main] idea by saying that while this type of worship, namely the sacrifices, is for a secondary purpose, and that crying out [to God] and prayer and similar types of worship are closer to the primary intention and necessary in order to reach it, there is a major difference between the two types. It is that this type of worship, namely offering the sacrifices, even though it is in God's name, was not commanded to us as it was originally done, meaning that we should offer them in every place and at every time, nor that we should make a temple wherever we have the chance and that anyone who has the chance may offer, "ordaining whoever may so desire" (1 Kings 13:33). Rather, all of this was forbidden to us and one Temple was indicated: "to the site that the Lord will choose" (Deuteronomy 12:26), and it is forbidden to offer sacrifices elsewhere: "[Take care] not to sacrifice your burnt offerings in any place you like" (v. 23), and the *kohen* may only be of special seed. All of this is to limit this type of worship so that none of it will remain besides what His wisdom did not decide to eliminate altogether. But prayer and supplication are permitted everywhere to whoever can do them. The same is true of *tzitzit*, and *mezuza* and *tefillin* and other similar types of worship.

Because of this matter that I have revealed to you it is frequently found in the books of the prophets that they reprimand people for the great zeal and ardour to bring sacrifices. This explains to them that they have no important function in and of themselves, that God does not need them. Samuel said, "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obedience to the Lord's command?" (1 Samuel 15:22). And Isaiah said, "What need have I of all your sacrifices?" says the Lord" (Isaiah 1:11). And Jeremiah said, "For when I freed your fathers from the land of Egypt, I did not speak with them or command them concerning burnt offerings or sacrifice. But this is what I commanded them: Do my bidding, that I may be your God and you may be my people" (Jeremiah 7:22-23). Whoever's words I have seen or heard has found difficulty in statement,

saying, "How could Jeremiah say that God did not command us 'concerning burnt offerings or sacrifice' when most of the commandments are about this?"

But this statement's meaning is what I explained to you, namely that He said the primary intention is that you be aware of Me and serve no one but Me, "that I will be your God and you shall be my people" (Leviticus 26:12). The commandment to sacrifice and focus on the Temple was, of course, so that you would be able to fulfil this principle, and for that reason I transferred the services to My name so that the idea of idolatry would be wiped out and the principle of My uniqueness would be preserved. But you came and nullified that purpose and intensified that which it was done against by doubting my existence: "They have been false to the Lord and said: He is not so!" (Jeremiah 5:12) You served idols: "and sacrifice to Baal and follow other Gods . . . and then come to this house" (ibid. 7:9-10). Your purpose remained the Temple of the Lord, but bringing sacrifices that were not fulfilling the primary purpose.

I have a different explanation of this verse which brings us back to the very matter we mentioned. Namely, that it is explained by both scripture and tradition that in the beginning of the commandment that we received there was nothing "concerning burnt offerings and sacrifice" at all. Do not bother yourself at all about *Pesah Mitzrayim* (the passover sacrifice in Egypt), because that was for a clear and open reason, as I will explain.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, this commandment was in the Land of Egypt, while the commandment alluded to in this verse is what we were commanded *after* we left Egypt. For this reason the verse explicitly said "when I freed your fathers from the land of Egypt," for the first commandment that came after the exodus from Egypt was what we were commanded at Marah, and this is what He said to us there: "If you will heed the Lord your God diligently" (Exodus 15:26), "there he made for them a rule and a law" (v. 25). And the true tradition states (*Shabbat* 87b, *Sanhedrin* 56b): "The Sabbath and civil laws were commanded at Marah." The "rule" it alludes to is the Sabbath, and the "law" is the *dinim* which are the removal of injustice. This is exactly the primary intention that we explained. I mean: faith in the true opinions, namely the creation of the world. You know that the main purpose of the Sabbath is to strengthen and uphold this principle, as we explained in this composition.<sup>18</sup> And another purpose of true opinions is to prevent people from doing injustice. Thus it has been explained to you that the first commandment had nothing "concerning burnt offerings and sacrifice" because they have just a secondary purpose, as we said.

This very point that Jeremiah made was said in the Psalms as a reprimand to the entire nation when it misunderstood the primary intention by not differentiating between it and the secondary intention. It said: "Pay heed, my people, and I will speak, O Israel, and I will arraign you. I am God, your God. I censure you not for your sacrifices, and your burnt

17. In chapter 46.

18. Part two, chapter 31.

offerings, made to me daily; I claim no bull from your estate, no he-goats from your pens" (Psalms 50:7–9). Whenever this matter is repeated—this is its meaning. Consider it well, and ponder it!

### QUESTIONS ON PART THREE, CHAPTER 32

1. For Rambam, which was closer to the "ideal": Prayer or sacrifice? Why? How does this compare to the relationship between prayer and sacrifice in the thought of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi?
2. Which people need *sacrifice* in order to eventually achieve God's "primary goal"? Which people need *prayer* to eventually achieve the "primary goal"?
3. Rabbi Moshe Narboni, in his *Explanation of the Guide to the Perplexed* (*Biur*, written 1362), wrote that Rambam's comments in this chapter have been terribly misunderstood. He did not mean that the Torah only allowed sacrifices as a concession to human habits. What Rambam really meant is that, like prayer, sacrifices were a common human activity that the Torah chose to utilize for a valuable purpose, namely to focus one's intentions on God.

Do you think that his reading of the above chapter is correct? What supports or refutes it?

(Readers seriously interested in this problem can consult the commentary "Shem Tov" by Shem Tov ben Yosef, written in 1488, and printed in the standard Warsaw edition of the *Moreh* with medieval commentaries. "Shem Tov" offers a thorough critical evaluation of Narboni's suggestion.)

4. Readers who want to better understand Rambam's views on sacrifice should also read part three, chapter 46. Try to catch some important differences in emphasis in that chapter.

### PART THREE, CHAPTER 36

The commandments included in the first category are the opinions we listed in *Hilkhot Yesodai ha-Torah*.<sup>19</sup> The reason for all of them is clear; consider each of them one by one, and you will find that it is true and provable. The purpose is similarly clear for all [commandments] that encourage and admonish one to study and teach, for if there is no wisdom there can be no proper action and no correct opinion. The value of honoring Torah scholars is similarly clear, because if they are not held high and esteemed in people's eyes they will not listen to their words when they guide a person in his opinions and actions. Also included in this is the

19. "Laws of the Foundations of the Torah," the first section of *Mishneh Torah*.



commandment to act with modesty and humility, I mean when it says, "You shall rise before the aged" (Leviticus 19:32).<sup>20</sup>

This category also includes the commandment to swear in His name and the admonition not to swear falsely or in vain. The cause of this is clear, being His honor, and these are acts which move a person to believe in His greatness.

Similarly, when He commanded us to cry out to Him at times of crisis,<sup>21</sup> I mean when it says, "you shall sound short blasts on the trumpets" (Numbers 9:10) is also in this category, because it is an action that strengthens the true opinion that God apprehends our circumstances and has the power to improve them if we serve Him, and to ruin them if we defy Him. We should not believe that it<sup>22</sup> is a chance thing that happened. That is what it means when it says, "and if you act toward Me *keri*"<sup>23</sup> (Leviticus 26:21)—it means: When I bring you these crises to punish you, if you consider them chance happenings [*mikre*] I will give you more of that "chance happening" (as you think it is) more severe and even harsher. This is what it means when it says, "[If] you act toward me with *keri*, I too will act toward you with hostile *keri*" (vv. 26–27). Because their belief that it is a chance happening compels them to continue in their incorrect opinions and unjust actions, and they will not repent of them, as it says, "You have struck them, but they sensed no pain" (Jeremiah 5:3). Therefore He commanded us to pray to Him and plead to Him and cry out to Him at times of crisis.

It is clear that repentance is also in this category, I mean the opinions which without believing in them, the existence of men of Torah would not be possible. For it is impossible for any person not to sin and transgress, whether by bearing a foolish opinion or a trait which is not truly virtuous, or by a victory of passion or anger. Were man to believe he can never straighten what has been made crooked, he would continue in his error, perhaps even increase his defiance, because he has no means left [to atone]. But with belief in repentance he will improve and return to the best practices even more perfect than he was before he sinned. This is why there are so many actions to support this true and valuable conviction; I mean the confessions and the sacrifices for unintentional sins and even for a few intentional ones, and the fasts. The general idea of repentance for any sin is to turn away from it. This is the purpose of this opinion. So the purpose of all of these is clear.

20. It is unclear what "modesty and humility" have to do with honoring the aged, nor what both have to do with honoring Torah scholars. Ibn Tibbon may mean that one should act toward aged *Torah scholars* with modesty and humility. Ibn Shmuel notes that this interpretation of the verse is found in Onkelos and in *Kiddushin* 32b, and is hinted at by Rambam in *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 6:9.

21. Cf. *Hilkhot Ta'anit* 1:1.

22. Our circumstances, in particular the crisis bringing us to cry out to God for help.

23. According to Rambam's interpretation, the grammatical root of *keri* is the same as the word for "by chance."

### QUESTIONS ON PART THREE, CHAPTER 36

1. This chapter is not really about prayer, but about "correct opinions." So why did Rambam bring up crying out to God for help and praying here?
2. Are prayer and repentance really the same thing according to Rambam?
3. It is clear that actions that reinforce true opinions are mitzvot. Does Rambam also consider the opinions *themselves* to be mitzvot?
4. From what you read in this chapter, do the opinions reinforced by prayer seem to be *objectively* true according to Rambam? What about if you compare them to the idea that God cannot be influenced (cf. 1:59 above)?
5. Exactly *when* is a person obligated to pray according to this chapter?

### PART THREE, CHAPTER 44

The commandments of the ninth category are the commandments we listed in *Sefer ha-Ahava*.<sup>24</sup> The reason for all of them is clear. I mean that the intention of all these services is remembering God continually, and loving Him and fearing Him and keeping all of the commandments, and believing about God all that it is necessary for a religious person to believe.

They<sup>25</sup> are prayer, and reading the *Shema*, and the blessing after meals, and whatever relates to them, and the blessing of the *kohanim*, and *tefillin*, and *mezuzah*, and *tzitzit*, and acquiring a Torah scroll and reading from it at times.

All of these are actions that teach beneficial opinions. All of this is clear and open, not needing any other explanation, which instead of being explanation would just be repetition.

### QUESTIONS ON PART THREE, CHAPTER 44

1. This is a very short chapter (as was chapter 36), because Rambam considers the reasons for these commandments to be obvious. What does such brevity indicate about the rational approach to prayer in general, as opposed to kabbalistic prayer?
2. How is the kind of prayer mentioned in this chapter *different* than the kind of prayer mentioned in chapter 36?

### PART THREE, CHAPTER 51

This particular chapter does not add anything new to what was included in the [previous] chapters of this book. It is nothing but a kind of conclusion

24. In the *Mishneh Torah*.

25. The mitzvot meant to keep God in mind constantly.

with an explanation of how one who apprehends the unique truths about God should worship Him after he comprehends them, of what it is and a guide to attain that kind of worship, which is the highest goal man can achieve, and to tell him how God's supervision of him will be in this world until he is gathered to "the bundle of life."<sup>26</sup>

I open this chapter with a parable that I will tell you. Let me say that the king is in his palace, and of his men, some are within the realm and some are outside of it. Of those who are within the realm, some have their backs to the king's abode and face another direction, while some face the king's abode and want to travel there, to visit his palace and stand before him, though until now he has never even seen the palace walls at all. But of those who want to visit the abode there are some who have reached it but still circle it trying to find the entrance gate. And of them there are some who have entered the gate and roam in the antechamber. And of them there are some who have entered the abode and are with the king in one place, in the king's abode. But he does not see the king or speak with him when he enters the abode; instead he is forced to make yet another effort to stand before the king and see him from afar or up close, or to hear the king's word or speak with him.

I will now explain this parable I invented for you by saying: Those who are outside of the realm are all people who have no religious faith, neither from rational investigation nor from tradition, like some of the Turks who roam in the north or the Cushites who roam the south, and those who resemble them living in these climates. These are in the category of living beasts who cannot speak, and I do not consider them to be human beings. Their level among existing things is lower than man but above the apes, because they have the appearance and image of men and greater perception than the ape.

Those who are within the realm but whose backs are to the king's abode are those who have a faith, or rational investigation, but who arrived at incorrect opinions, whether because of a major error they made when they studied or that they received them from someone who misled them. Because of those opinions they will forever become more distant from the king's abode. These people are far worse than the first group, and they are the ones that it is sometimes necessary to kill, and to wipe out the memory of their opinions so that they will not mislead others.

Those who want to come to the king's abode and enter to be with him, but who have never seen the king's abode at all, are the numerous people of the Torah, I mean the uneducated masses who fulfil the commandments.

Those who reach the abode but circle it [looking for the gate] are the talmudists, those who believe the correct opinions because of tradition and learn how to serve God, but who are not used to investigating the roots of the Torah and have not ever researched in order to prove the truth of faith.

Those who have begun to investigate the principles of the religion have

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26. A euphemism based on 1 Samuel 25:29.

already entered the antechamber, and the people found there are undoubtedly on different levels.

But he who has achieved proven knowledge of whatever can be proven, and knows the truth of whatever is possible to be known of Divine matters, and has succeeded in showing the truth of that which can only lead to His truth—he has succeeded to be with the king in His abode.

Understand, my son, that as long as you are involved with study and learning logic, you are one of those who circles the abode looking for the gate. As they of blessed memory said in the way of parable: “Ben Zoma is still outside” (*Hagiga* 15a). But when you understand physics, you will already have entered the palace’s antechamber, and when you finish physics and understand metaphysics, you have already entered to be with the king “in the inner court” (Ezekiel 44:21, 27); you are with Him in one place. This is the level of the scholars, and even they have different levels of perfection. But whoever puts all of his thought, after his perfection, on Divine matters, and cares entirely for God, and turns his thoughts from anything besides Him, and uses all his rational activity concerning existing things to employ them as proofs about God, to understand the way He directs them as much as possible—they are the ones who have entered the king’s abode, and this is the level of the prophets.

There is one of them who, because of his great understanding and because he removed his thoughts from anything besides God, so that it is said of him, “and he was there with the Lord” (Exodus 34:28)—he would ask and he would be answered, speak and be spoken to during that holy encounter. Because of his great joy at what he achieved “he ate no bread and drank no water” (*ibid.*), since his intellect was invigorated so much that every course power in his body was nullified (I mean the various senses of touch). And some of the prophets only saw [God] alone, some of them from up close and some of them from a distance, as it says, “The Lord revealed Himself to me from afar” (Jeremiah 31:2). We have already spoken of the levels of prophecy.<sup>27</sup>

Let us return to the topic of the chapter, which is to admonish a person to apply his thoughts to God alone once he has reached understanding of Him, as we explained. This is the special worship for those who apprehend the true opinions, and the more they think about Him and stand before Him, the more they worship. But a person who thinks of God and often recalls Him without wisdom, but instead is drawn toward partial misconceptions, or to a belief told to him by someone else—I consider him, since he is outside of the palace and far from it, not to truly recall God and not to think about Him. Because the idea he imagines or mentions with his lips does not fit what truly is, but is something his imagination calls up, as we explained when we spoke of the attributes.<sup>28</sup>

Rather, this sort of worship should begin with rational notions. When you comprehend God and His actions as far as the mind can, then you must

27. See part two, chapter 45.

28. See part one, chapter 50.

begin to give yourself over to Him, to try to become close to Him, to strengthen the bond between you and Him, which is the intellect. It says, "You have been shown to know [that the Lord alone is God]" (Deuteronomy 4:35), and "Know therefore this day and keep in mind . . ." (v. 39) and "Know that the Lord is God" (Psalms 100:3). The Torah thus explained that this final form of worship, which we are calling to attention in this chapter, can only be through intellectual comprehension. It says, "loving the Lord Your God and serving Him with all your heart and soul" (Deuteronomy 11:13), and we explained many times that love is according to intellectual comprehension. And according to [this kind of] love should that worship be about which they, of blessed memory, said, "This is the worship of the heart" (*Sifrei*).<sup>29</sup> According to me this means that a person must apply all his thought to the First Intelligence and seclude himself in order to do this as much as possible. This is why you find that David, of blessed memory, commanded and admonished his son Solomon severely about these two things, namely, to concentrate on comprehending Him and to avidly pursue His worship after the comprehension. He said: "And you, my son Solomon, know the God of your father and serve Him . . . if you seek Him He will be available to you . . ." (1 Chronicles 28:9). This admonition was certainly regarding intellectual comprehension and not imaginary things, because imaginary thoughts are never called "knowing," but only "what comes into your mind" (Ezekiel 20:32). It is clear that one's intention after intellectual comprehension should be to give oneself over to Him and always apply his rational thoughts with longing toward Him. This is usually achieved in isolation and seclusion. Because of this every *hasid* must often isolate and seclude himself, and not deal with people except when it is rendered necessary.

A Note: I explained to you that the mind which was bestowed on us by God is the bond between us and Him. The choice is yours: If you want to intensify this bond you may do so, and if you want to slowly weaken it until you break it you may do so. This bond can only be intensified when you exercise it by loving God and directing yourself to Him (as we explained). It is weakened when you apply your thought to something besides Him. Know that you, even if you were the greatest human scholar of metaphysics, when you apply your thought to necessary eating or business you have already broken the bond between yourself and God and you are not then with Him, nor is He with you, because the relationship between you and Him is broken in actuality at that moment. This is why the pious men were stringent about the times they did not think of God and avoided them, saying "Do not remove God from your thoughts!" (*Shabbat* 149a). And David said, "I am ever mindful of the Lord's presence; He is at my right hand; I shall never be shaken" (Psalms 16:8). He meant: I never remove my thoughts from Him, as if He were my right hand, which a person never forgets even for the blink of an eye because of its frequent

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29. "The worship of the heart" refers to prayer.

movements. And because of this "I shall never be shaken" (meaning: I will never fall).

Know that all these activities of worship, such as reading the Torah, and prayer, and doing the other commandments—their entire purpose is to teach a person to occupy himself with God's commandments and turn away from worldly matters, as if you only occupied yourself with God and abandoned everything besides Him. But if you pray moving your lips while you face a wall, but you think of your business affairs; or you read the Torah with your tongue but your heart is thinking about building your house, with no awareness of what you are reading; or you fulfil any commandment with your limbs like a person who digs a hole in the ground or chops trees in the forest with no awareness of the true meaning of the action, not who commanded it to be done nor its true purpose—do not think you have achieved the purpose. You will then be like those of whom it was said, "You are present in their mouths, but far from their thoughts" (Jeremiah 12:2).

Let me now begin to guide you in the proper training and instruction, so that you can achieve this great goal. The first thing you must begin to do is to keep your thoughts from anything else when you read the *Shema* and when you pray. Do not make do with *kavvana* during *Shema* for [just] the first verse, or for the first blessing during prayer. When you become accustomed to this and it is within your power for many years, then begin putting your whole heart and soul into what you hear or read every time you read the Torah. After this too is within your grasp for some time, accustom yourself to clear your mind for whatever you read from the other books of the prophets, even for all of the blessings; mean what you say in them and ascertain their significance.

When these forms of worship become pure for you and you apply your thought to them when you do them, clear of any thought about worldly matters, afterward be careful not to burden your thoughts with your needs or your eating. To conclude: Apply your thought to worldly matters when you eat or drink, or when you are in the bathhouse, or when you talk to your wife and your small children or when you talk to common people. These are plenty of times that I have found for you to think about whatever you need regarding money and directing your household and caring for your body during them. But when you perform the Torah worship do not burden your mind with anything but what you are doing, as we explained.

However, when you are alone with no one else, and when you are awake on your bed, be very careful not to apply your thoughts to anything else but cognitive worship during those special times. Namely, to come close to God and stand before Him in the true way I have made known to you, not the way of deluded actions. It is possible to reach this goal, in my opinion, for a scholar who prepares himself for it through accustoming himself in this way.

But when a person comprehends truths, and his joy at what he has comprehended is such that he talks to people and deals with his bodily needs but at the same time his mind is with God, and he is before Him always in his heart even though his body is with other people, along the lines of what is said in the poetic parables about these matters: "I was

asleep, but my heart was wakeful" (Song of Songs 5:2), I will not say that this is the level of all prophets, but that it is the level of Moses our teacher, peace be upon him, about whom it was said, "Moses alone shall come near the Lord; but the others shall not come near" (Exodus 24:2), and of whom it was said, "and he was there with the Lord" (Exodus 34:28), and to whom it was said, "But you remain here with me" (Deuteronomy 5:28), as we have explained the idea of these verses.<sup>30</sup>

This was also the level of the patriarchs, whose closeness to God became such that His name became known to the world through them, "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob . . . this shall be my name forever" (Exodus 3:15). Their knowledge became so united [to Him] through comprehension of Him that he made an everlasting covenant with each of them: "Then I will remember my covenant with Jacob . . ." <sup>31</sup> (Leviticus 26:42).

In these four, I mean the patriarchs and Moses our teacher, was unity with God fulfilled, meaning comprehension and love of Him, as scripture testified. And God's providence (*hashgaha*) over them and their children after them was very great, though at the same time they were involved in guiding people and making money and working with flocks. To me this is proof that when they did these things they only did them with their physical limbs, but their hearts and their minds would not leave God. It seems to me that the reason these four stood before God with this complete perfection, and His providence over them continued even when they were involved in making money (I mean when they let their flocks graze or worked the land or directed their households), was that their true intention through all of these actions was to come exceedingly close to God. Because their true intention all the days of their lives was to bring forth a nation that would know God and serve Him: "For I know him, that he will instruct [his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right]" (Genesis 18:19). This shows you that the intention of all their efforts was to publicize God's unity throughout the world and to guide people to loving Him. This is why they reached this level, because [all] their affairs were actual service [of God].

This is not a level that someone like me should imagine giving guidance towards reaching. But it is possible to reach the previous level we mentioned through the practice we mentioned. To God we plead and pray to remove and take away the hindrances dividing us from Him. And this is even though most of the hindrances are from our side, as we explained in the chapters of this composition,<sup>32</sup> "but your iniquities have been a barrier between you and your God" (Isaiah 59:2).

30. See the discussion further on in this chapter.

31. The verse continues, "I will remember also my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham; and I will also remember the land." Thus, the verse does indicate that God made an everlasting covenant with each of them as Rambam wrote.

32. Part three, chapter 12.

Now a very wonderful idea was revealed to me, which will remove doubts and reveal Divine secrets. It is, as we explained in the chapters on Providence,<sup>33</sup> that according to the intelligence of intelligent beings will be the providence over them. The person whose comprehension is complete, who does not remove his mind from God—there will always be continuous providence for him. The person with complete comprehension who sometimes turns his thoughts from God—there will be providence for him only while he thinks of God, which will leave him when he is absorbed in other things. But it will not leave him even then as it leaves a person who does not contemplate at all; the providence will rather be lessened, because that person whose comprehension is complete does not have intellectual contemplation in actuality when he is absorbed in other things. But his intellectual contemplation is a near potential, and at that moment he resembles a quick scribe while he is not writing.

But a person who has not apprehended God at all is like a person who is in darkness and never saw light, as we explained<sup>34</sup> when it says, “but the wicked are as if in darkness” (1 Samuel 2:9). As to a person who has comprehended [God] and his entire intent is on what he has learned, he is like someone in the bright sun. And as to a person who has comprehension and is absorbed in something else, he is like a person on a cloudy day, whom the sun does not shine upon because of the cloud separating it from him.

Because of this it seems that whenever one of the prophets or pure righteous men is afflicted by one of the evils of the world, that evil found him during such a time of forgetfulness. The severity of the affliction will be according to the unimportance of the matter he is absorbed in or the length of the forgetfulness.

Since this is so, the great doubt cast by the philosophers rejecting providence for individuals and making them like individual animals<sup>35</sup> is removed. For their proof was when pious and good people were confronted with great evils. The problem is solved through this, even according to their opinion. For God’s providence is continual for whoever His bounty reaches, which is available for anyone who makes an effort to have it reach him. When a man’s thoughts turn toward comprehending God in the true ways and he is overjoyed by what he has achieved, it is impossible for any kind of evil to befall that person then, because he is with God and God is with him. But when he turns his thoughts from God, he is then separated from God and God is separated from him, and he is a target for any evil that may find him, because what brings providence and saves one from the sea of accidents is that intellectual bounty. It<sup>36</sup> was separated at times from that

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33. Part three, chapters 17–18. For a discussion of this, see chapter five of this book.

34. Also in chapter 18.

35. In the sense that there is no providence for animals, either, who are not judged for their deeds.

36. The “intellectual bounty,” as Rambam conceives of God’s *shefa*.



good and pious man, or it never at all reached that deficient, evil man, and this is why some evil thing happened to both of them.

I also became convinced of the truth of this belief from the words of the Torah. God said, "And I will hide my countenance from them. They shall be ready prey; and many evils and troubles shall befall them. And they shall say on that day, 'Surely it is because our God is not in our midst that these evils have befallen us'" (Deuteronomy 31:17). It is clear that we are the reason for this "hiding of countenance," and we make the screen between us and Him. This is what it means when it says: "Yet I will keep My countenance hidden on that day, because of all the evil they have done" (v. 18). And there is no doubt that individuals are treated like the community.

Thus it is clear to you that the reason a certain person is abandoned to chance and is a target to be devoured by animals is his being separated from God. But anyone who has God in his midst, no evil at all will touch him, as God said, "Fear not, for I am with you, be not frightened, for I am your God" (Isaiah 41:10), and He said, "When you pass through water I will be with you; through streams, they shall not overwhelm you" (ibid. 43:2). [It means: "If you pass through water *when* I am with you—the streams shall not overwhelm you."] <sup>37</sup> For whoever prepared himself for intelligence to flow to him, Providence will attach to him and keep all evils away from him. As it says: "The Lord is on my side, I have no fear; what can man do to me?" (Psalms 118:6); and it says, "Be close to Him and be whole" (Job 22:21), meaning "turn to Him and be wholly [free] from all evil."

Consider the poem of afflictions (Psalm 91) and you will see that it tells of the great Providence and shelter and protection from all physical evils, both general ones and those which pertain to one specific person and no other. Neither those that are of natural causes nor those caused by people [will touch him]. It says: "He will save you from the fowler's trap, from the destructive plague. He will cover you with his pinions; you will find refuge under his wings; His fidelity is an encircling shield. You need not fear the terror by night, or the arrow that flies by day, the plague that stalks in the darkness, or the scourge that ravages at noon" (vv. 3–6). And then it tells of protection from evils caused by people, saying that you, if you happen to pass through a spreading sword battle while you are on your way, even if a thousand are killed on your left and ten thousand on your right, no evil at all will befall you. Instead you will look and see God's justice, as He pays back those evildoers who were killed while you remained unharmed. This is what it means when it says, "A thousand may fall at your left side, ten thousand at your right, but it shall not reach you. You will see it with your eyes, you will witness the punishment of the wicked" (vv. 7–8). Then it said what it added about protection and shelter [from God]. After this it gave a reason for this great protection, saying that this is the reason this person has such great protection: "Because he yearns

37. This explanation of the verse is found in Ibn Shmuel's edition of the Hebrew *Moreh* in square brackets. I did not find it in the standard printed editions of Ibn Tibbon.

for Me I will deliver him; I will keep him safe, for he knows my name" (v. 14). We explained in earlier chapters that "knowing the name" is comprehending Him, as if it had said, "This man's protection is because he knew Me and yearned for Me afterward." You know the difference between "love" and "yearn": So much love so that no thought is left except of the beloved—that is yearning.

The philosophers explained that the physical vigor of youth prevents most of the elevated traits, all the more so this pure thought that comes within man's grasp from intellectual perfection that brings him to yearn for God. Because the intellect overcomes the falsehood that a person conjures with the instability of physical youth, for as physical power weakens and the fire of passion is extinguished, the intellect gains strength and its light increases; one's comprehension clears and he is overjoyed at what he has apprehended. Such that when a perfect man is old and close to death, that comprehension gains additional strength, and his joy at that comprehension will increase along with his yearning to die, until the life-force leaves the body during that time of pleasure.

The sages (*Bava Batra* 17a) alluded to this when they said of the deaths of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam that "all three died with a kiss." And they said that when it says "So Moses the servant of the Lord died there . . . [by the mouth of the Lord]" (Deuteronomy 34:5) it "teaches that he died with a kiss." It says a similar thing of Aaron: ". . . by the mouth of the Lord, and he died there" (Numbers 33:38) and of Miriam: "she too died with a kiss," but it did not mention "by the mouth of the Lord" for her, since she was a woman and it would not have been right to apply this analogy to her. The point regarding the three of them is that they died during the ecstasy of that great apprehension, out of abounding desire. In saying this Hazal followed the poetic expression of the distinguished Song by calling the comprehension that arrives with powerful yearning for God a "kiss" as it says, "Let him give me the kisses of His mouth" (Song of Songs 1:2).

Hazal only mentioned that this kind of death, which is in truth *escape* from death, came to Moses and Aaron and Miriam. The rest of the prophets and righteous men are lower than this, but all of their intellects are strengthened at death, as is said, "Your righteousness shall march before you, the glory of the Lord shall gather you in" (Isaiah 58:8). His intellect will remain forever afterward in this one state, for the barrier that at times separated it from the object of its comprehension will have been removed. It will remain in that great bliss, which is utterly unlike physical pleasures, as we have explained in our work and as those who preceded us explained.

Concentrate on understanding this chapter, and try as much as you can to increase those times when you are with God, or that you try to reach Him, and to minimize those times when you are with other things and not trying to be close to Him. This guidance is sufficient for the goal of this composition.

### QUESTIONS ON PART THREE, CHAPTER 51

1. "Many of the rabbinic scholars said: This chapter was not written by the Master [Rambam]. And even if he did write it it must be discarded,

and it ought better to be burned" (from the commentary on the *Moreh* by Shem Tov ben Yosef). What in particular makes this chapter so very troubling that it could inspire these bitter comments?

2. In his commentary on the *Moreh* ("Crescas," written in about 1440), Rabbi Asher Crescas took deep issue with the "very wonderful idea" that was "revealed" to Rambam. First, he pointed out that there are numerous people (even great prophets) who, despite their attachment to God, suffered terribly or had a deep fear of physical harm. He cited examples from the Bible, Talmud, and later times. Can you think of some?

Second, he wrote the following: "Furthermore, a completely pious man who studies Torah day and night, keeps the commandments and avoids sin, but knows God through tradition and not through rational proof—how is he protected according to our holy Torah which says that our good fortune and evil fortune depend on serving God or defiance? If we say that there is no providence for them, we might also say that there is no reward for them after death, and this means that their service and piety and keeping the commandments of the Torah and dying to sanctify God's name (!)—all that they did was for naught, because their souls were not saved through these activities.

"Now we believe fully in the Torah as our fathers did, and in God's providence on our nation and our individual righteous men who keep the Torah and its commandments, whether they know God through logical proof or through tradition, that they all will be rewarded after death by the duration of each of their souls according to each one's level of perfection.

"But to limit Providence and define it exactly, such that it cannot depart from certain ways and measures, to objectively define its limits so that no man may disagree with that limit, neither based on scripture nor on experience—then these gates are locked before me and others like me. Let us raise our prayer to God to bring us out of the pit of our exile and return us to our holy, beautiful and glorious inheritance, so that His providence over us will be as it was before, and He will raise our Temple and the worship will return to its place speedily in our days, Amen." How do you think Rambam would have responded to all of these devastating points?

Third and last, Crescas pointed out that according one translation of the *Moreh* (that of Al-Harizi) and some commentaries, Rambam did not say that his "wonderful idea" was "revealed" to him, but that it "seems" to be true, i.e., it is only a possible hypothesis. Crescas further suggests (drawing from the commentary *Moreh ha-Moreh* by Rabbi Shem Tov Falqira, written in about 1280) that Rambam really offers this idea as a response to the claim of the philosophers that providence cannot be true because the righteous suffer. In other words, Rambam only says that this idea "seems" correct, and if it is, that it removes the major objection of the philosophers so that we can believe in providence. Can you find indications in this chapter either supporting or refuting Crescas's suggestion?

3. At the beginning of this chapter, what criteria does Rambam use to classify people? What underlying assumption about “essential” values is at the root of this kind of classification (see chapter five of this book)? Does the fact that Rambam compares people this way bother you? If so, how and why?
4. How does Rambam’s view on seclusion for a *hasid* compare to Halevi’s?
5. Does a person ever “outgrow” prayer according to Rambam? What is a person’s relationship to prayer (if any) after he has succeeded in achieving “true knowledge” of God?
6. How many different ways can you explain “*kavvana*” according to this chapter? Is *kavvana* here the same thing as in chapters 32, 36, and 44?
7. Rambam presents *kavvana* as something that improves, with effort, over a lifetime. Is it just the *capacity* for *kavvana* that a person slowly gains, or does the *nature* of his *kavvana* also change as he grows older?
8. Now that you have read this chapter in addition to chapter 32, can you give a definitive answer to the question of how prayer differs from sacrifice according to Rambam?
9. Look up *Laws of Repentance* 10:3–6 (end). How do the sentiments Rambam expressed in that passage fit in perfectly with this chapter?



## Reading 5. Rabbi Hasdai Crescas on Prayer

### *Or Hashem* / The Light of the Lord

#### INTRODUCTION

Rabbi Hasdai Crescas (c. 1350–1412, Christian Spain) finished his most important work, *Or Hashem* (“The Light of the Lord”), two years before his death. Besides this major philosophic work, he is also known for polemical works against Christianity, and for debating Christian clerics. *Or Hashem*, though it accepts many of the basic principles of Rambam’s philosophy, was meant to build on those principles in a new way and provide an alternative to Rambam’s Aristotelian approach. It also rejects Rambam’s classification of Jewish dogma into thirteen principles, and substitutes a new scheme for Jewish belief (with six basic principles).

There is no critical edition of *Or Hashem*. I therefore checked my translation against the corrected, punctuated edition by Shlomo Fisher (Jerusalem: Sifrei Ramot, 1990) which itself is based on early printed editions and manuscripts. Even when the text itself is correct, there are still many ambiguous or unclear passages in *Or Hashem*, a product of the author’s extreme brevity; unfortunately, there are no commentaries to provide help in these situations. Nor has the book ever been translated. Therefore, in each case, I have translated according to the meaning that, to me, seems to fit the context best and makes the most sense. But occasionally the ambiguity of the original text comes through in the translation as well, and this cannot be helped. Interested readers should, of course, check any point of concern by consulting the original Hebrew.

Readers should be warned that *Or Hashem* is notorious for how hard it is to read and understand. You will often find that you have to read a paragraph more than once. Instead of getting sidetracked by biblical and

rabbinic quotations, keep focusing on the central problem Crescas is trying to solve and the overall direction he takes. Consult the explanatory notes for extra help.

Rabbi Hasdai Crescas was Rabbi Yosef Albo's teacher. So keep in mind what you read here when you get to the next reading, from Albo's *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*. Try to pinpoint where and how Albo drew on Crescas' teachings about prayer, and also try to note any conceptual differences between the two.

Or Hashem's discussion on prayer is to be found in its third treatise, part two. The first essay (*kelal*) in part two has two chapters, the first on prayer and the second on *birkat kohanim*, the blessing of the priests.

## Or Hashem, Third Treatise, Part Two: Text

### THE FIRST ESSAY, ON PRAYER AND BIRKAT KOHANIM

Though they are commandments,<sup>1</sup> beliefs are also inherent in them, the belief being that God responds to one who prays to Him, and to the *kohanim* who bless Israel. Since they are of one type, we have included them in this Essay, but have divided it into two chapters.

### THE FIRST CHAPTER, ON PRAYER

The belief inherent in this commandment is for us to believe that God responds to the request of one who prays, who relies on Him with utter heartfelt sincerity. As it says, "The Lord is near to all who call Him, to all who call Him *in truth*" (Psalms 145:18). This means that the call must not be with the mouth alone, while one feels differently in his heart and thinks nothing of the sort. This would make him like those about whom it was said, "You are present in their mouths, but far from their thoughts" (Jeremiah 12:2).

And the verse said "to all who call Him" to teach that even if one is unworthy and unfitting to receive his request without prayer, nevertheless through prayer, besides the reward for the mitzva [of praying], he may also receive his request. This is because he sincerely puts his trust in God.

This is the whole idea of trust in God (*bitahon*), which includes important principles of the Torah: His knowledge, his personal supervision (*hashgaha*), that He is the Mover who willingly sends His bounty. The main aspects of this are already explained by tradition.

This principle is also alluded to in prayer. Solomon said, "Or if a

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1. Prayer and *birkat kohanim*.

foreigner . . .<sup>2</sup> (1 Kings 8:41). This teaches that even if he is not worthy in and of himself, nevertheless through prayer he may receive his request.

And what the poet David said testifies to this as well: "All mankind comes to You, You who hear prayer" (Psalms 65:3). It is evident that he said this because of one of the clear conditions of prayer, namely that the sequence of praises must come first. As it says in the first chapter of *Avoda Zara* (7b): "A person must always say the sequence of God's praises and pray only afterwards." Since one might think arranging God's praises should be kept from the common people, and should be only for select individuals, the psalmist [David] began by addressing this point: "Silence befits You in Zion, O God; vows are paid to You" (previous verse). This means that in Zion, the city God chose to inhabit by having His dwelling place there—that in Zion, on the one hand, silence is His praise because of the special ones who fear to praise Him (for a reason that I will mention later if God so decrees); and on the other hand "vows are paid," meaning that by the sacrifices brought with vows or as gifts, they (so to speak) set Him a table as they would set for human beings. This also means that everything is from Him, and all have need of Him and put their trust in Him. Therefore, he continued by saying "All mankind comes to You, You who hear prayer," meaning both those who are perfect and those who are not. This is the same idea with which he closed the psalm "*Mizmor le-David*" (psalm 145), concerning the praise of God: "My mouth shall utter the praise of the Lord, and all flesh shall bless His holy name" (v. 21). By "My mouth shall utter" he refers to himself, for his measure of perfection is not hidden. And then he said, "and all flesh shall bless His holy name forever and ever," meaning even those who are not perfect. This is why those who arranged the prayers attached to it, "But we will bless the Lord now and forever" (Psalms 115:18).<sup>3</sup> In other words, since His wisdom wills it through David's statement, it is fitting for us to praise God now and forever.

We saw fit to elaborate on this somewhat because of what some scholars concluded about the impossibility of descriptions [of God] from the words of the master [Rambam] in the *Guide*, namely that His essence precludes all positive attributes. They base themselves on the statement of Rabbi Hanina, as they said (in the Talmud, *Berakhot* 33b):

A person led the prayers before Rabbi Hanina and said: "The God who is great, mighty, and awesome, glorious and powerful, feared and

2. The whole passage in the first book of Kings reads: "Or if a foreigner who is not of Your people Israel comes from a distant land for the sake of Your name . . . when he comes to pray toward this house, oh hear in Your heavenly abode and grant all that the foreigner asks You for" (8:41, 43). The passage is from Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem. It is thus clear that prayer to God, and prayer at the Temple, is proper for gentiles as well as Jews. In his prayer, Solomon asks God to answer the prayers of gentiles, just as he asks Him to answer the prayers of Israel. But according to Crescas, Solomon implies that the gentile in this passage is a person unworthy of having his prayer answered.

3. This verse is attached to the end of *Ashrei* in the liturgy, after "and all flesh shall bless His holy name forever and ever."

strong!" He said to him: "Have you finished all the praises of your Master?"

. . . but people praise him for his silver! Isn't this an insult to him?!<sup>4</sup>

Because of this they thought that attributes have identical meaning [for man and for God], that the sharp parable shows this [to be wrong] when it says that they praise him for his silver, which is not the same class as gold. But we already explained this matter earlier when we said that the attributes have essential primary and secondary meanings shared by Him and by ourselves, which correspond in a limited way.<sup>5</sup> The idea is that the attributes said of Him are infinite, but they are said of us in a finite way. Also, they are said of Him in that He procures their reality to us, while for us they are merely acquired from Him. Only in this way may the attributes be said to correspond, and this idea is alluded to in the parable of the silver dinars and gold dinars. But God's essence doesn't prevent positive attributes, perish the thought! The plain meaning of the rabbinic passage shows this when it says, "Have you *finished* all the praises of your Master?" In other words, *finishing* God's praises is prevented by His essence, since they must be infinite.<sup>6</sup> We explained this at length at the end of the first treatise. This is the absolute truth of the matter.

And since we speak of God's attributes allegorically and poetically in the prayers, it was proper for them to introduce words into the *kaddish* that testify to this fact. This is when it says "above all blessings, songs, praises [and regrets]" which alludes to the fact that God does not receive blessings,

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4. Crescas only cites the beginning and end of the talmudic passage, assuming it is familiar to the reader from Rambam's discussion of it in the *Guide*, 1:59. See the full text as quoted by Rambam in reading 4.

5. The technical term in Hebrew is *sippuk*, which indicates that a description has a primary meaning for describing a certain object, but the same word is used to describe a second kind of object whose properties are similar in some way. *Sippuk* implies a stronger correlation than *shem mush'al* ("borrowed term") which means that a word is applied to a second object even though the similarity is only superficial. An example of *shem mush'al* is the word "leg," whose true and primary meaning is the limb of a man or beast. But once man began to craft tables, chairs, and beds, he applied the same word to their supports.

*Sippuk*, however, means that there is real substance to the analogy of applying human attributes to God. This does not mean they are the same either. So that there will be no confusion, Crescas points out the differences immediately: When describing God, the attributes refer to infinite qualities, while ours are only finite. For God, the attributes are of His eternal essence, while for us they are but acquired traits.

Both terms are from Rabbi Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation of the *Guide to the Perplexed*. See especially the introduction to the first treatise, and 1:3 for a good example of *sippuk*. It is also worth reading Ibn Tibbon's "Explanation of Unusual Terms" which he included as an appendix to his translation.

6. But descriptions of Him are not impossible; it is only to finish describing Him that cannot be done.



He renders them. And when it says "song and praise" it alludes to the attributes, whether they be expressed through song or praise. And when it says "regrets" it teaches about petition, lest one think that He is influenced through prayer and changes His mind; but it is not so. Rather, it was His primordial Will to respond to any worthy prayer.

We have strayed from the theme of the chapter somewhat, but only because this is a matter about which many have been deceived by following the simple meaning of the *Guide*.

Let us return to what we were discussing by saying that the stories of the Torah, and Moses's prayer for Israel, and Abraham's prayer for Sodom and Gomorrah, and Isaac's prayer for his wife, and similar stories in the Talmud—all show that in the merit of prayer by a righteous man, God may answer him, even if he prays for someone else. Our rabbis of blessed memory even held that God answers the righteous man when it comes to people who have already died, and even for evildoers, as they expounded regarding David and Absalom (see *Sota* 10b). Even though this is just a parable, the firm custom among all Israel is to bless the deceased and to pray for them. About this and similar matters they said (*Pesahim* 66b): "Let Israel be. If they are not prophets, they are at least the children of prophets."

## THE SECOND CHAPTER, ON *BIRKAT KOHANIM*

The belief inherent to in this mitzva is stated explicitly in the Torah: "Thus they shall link My name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them" (Numbers 6:27). Though they argued in the gemara of tractate *Hullin* (49a) as to its exact meaning—one opinion explaining "I will bless them" as referring to Israel, and the other opinion explaining "I will bless them" as referring to the *kohanim*—in any event, Israel remain the object of the blessing.<sup>7</sup> And since it is not conditional on the perfection or piety of the *kohen* at all, we must believe that when we are fit to receive the blessing—in other words, when there is nothing preventing it from our standpoint—there will be nothing preventing it from the standpoint of the *kohanim* either. It is just that there may be other things standing in the way of the mitzva, as is explained there. What proves this<sup>8</sup> is that a drunkard may lift his hands<sup>9</sup> according to the Torah, and was only forbidden from doing so by rabbinic decree. They even said there that one suspected of sin may lift his hands. This makes it clear that his being a scholar or righteous man is not a condition of the mitzva.

This is because the *kohanim* mediate between Israel and their Father in Heaven, the blessing being at the request of the congregation. For only then

7. In other words, even if "I will bless them" means the *kohanim*, the idea is that after they bless Israel God will bless them in return. But the blessing itself that they say is for Israel.

8. That the blessing takes effect when Israel are fit to receive it, even if the *kohanim* aren't.

9. I.e., he may recite the blessing. The *kohen* raises his hands when he says the blessing, so it is commonly called "the raising of the hands."

are they obligated to perform this mitzva,<sup>10</sup> as they [Haza] interpreted the words, "Say to them"—the *kohanim* (*Sota* 38a).<sup>11</sup> Thus, the people have already put their trust in God. And since we have the principle that the prayer of the congregation is better accepted, as the gemara says in *Berakhot* (8a), there is no requirement for the *kohanim* to be perfect, such that if they weren't perfect there would be no purpose [to the blessing].

Add to this that God endowed the mitzvot with special qualities, just like medicines. Just as medicines work according to their qualities and overall essence, the mitzvot of the Torah do exactly the same. Just as one medicine can dilute the effect of another, so too do mitzvot and sins affect each other. Sometimes the effect of a certain mitzva is to supply some physical good, but a certain sin will prevent that good from reaching a person. Or the opposite, that a certain sin should cause physical harm, but a certain mitzva with the corresponding positive effect will prevent it from reaching him.

According to what is explained in the Torah, God endowed the *kohanim* with the ability to be the conduit for receiving the blessing from Him and passing it to Israel. This is why they are commanded to lift their hands up high, as if they were receiving the blessing in their hands to deliver it to Israel. That hands are capable of receiving blessing is already known from when it says, "and to bless all the work of your hands" (Deuteronomy 28:12).

Tradition is explicit that acceptance of prayer is specifically for one who clings [to God] and serves [Him], even if his level of Torah knowledge is not great, and more so than for a person of great wisdom who is not on the same level of serving [God]. And in the gemara of *Berakhot* (34b) there is a story proving what we have said, which is when they said that when Rabbi Yohanan became ill, his wife asked him, "Is Hanina greater than you?"<sup>12</sup> He replied, "He is like a servant before the king, while I am like a prince before the king." It should be understood that this "princely" authority refers to his being at a greater level of wisdom than Rabbi Hanina. But Rabbi Hanina was a saint who served God continuously, so his prayer was better accepted.

This is what we wanted to explain [about prayer and *birkat kohanim*]. Praise is to God alone, who is above all blessing and praise.

10. Are the *kohanim* obligated to perform the mitzva of blessing the people.

11. I.e., the *kohanim* are specifically asked or told to bless the people (Numbers 6:23). In the halakhic literature, one rationale suggested for the custom that the *sheli'ah tzibbur* says the words of the blessing out loud, one by one, and the *kohanim* repeat after him, is to show that the content of the blessing is defined by the congregation, not by the *kohanim*. This halakhic practice fits in beautifully with Crescas's philosophy.

12. In the full text of the story in the Talmud, Rabbi Yohanan asked Rabbi Hanina, who was his student, to pray for his recovery. Rabbi Hanina did pray, and Rabbi Yohanan was immediately healed. Whereupon Rabbi Yohanan said that if he himself had prayed all day long, his prayer would not even have been noticed (as opposed to Rabbi Hanina's prayer). This is why Rabbi Yohanan's wife asked him, "Is Hanina greater than you?"

QUESTIONS ON *OR HASHEM*

1. Read all of Solomon's prayer (1 Kings 8:22–53), paying special attention to the point about gentiles coming to the Temple to pray. According to Crescas, Solomon asks God to answer the gentile's prayer *despite* the fact that he is not worthy of having his request granted. What elements of Solomon's prayer indicate that Crescas is correct? Does anything in the biblical passage intimate the opposite?
2. Rational philosophy assumes that God's decisions cannot be "influenced." Yet petitionary prayer presumes to influence His decision about whatever the person prays for! How does Crescas solve this apparent contradiction in a unique way?
3. Compare Crescas's interpretation of the passage about the gold and silver dinars to Rambam's (found in the previous reading). Do you think Crescas means to explain what Rambam really meant, or to disagree with him? Why?
4. Crescas gave two different explanations for the effectiveness of prayer. What are they? Could they lead to contradictory conclusions about whether a particular prayer will be effective and be answered?
5. What element of Crescas's philosophy of prayer is highly reminiscent of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi's thought?
6. Compare Crescas's view on what makes a person worthy of having his prayers answered to Rambam's.



## Reading 6. Rabbi Yosef Albo on Prayer

### *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* / The Book of Principles

#### INTRODUCTION

Rabbi Yosef Albo (1380–1444, Christian Spain) was a student of Rabbi Hasdai Crescas (see the previous reading); his work draws on that of his teacher and other previous thinkers. He usually does not name his sources, however, because his book was meant to be a popular one; his hope was that it would reinforce the faith of common Jews by justifying Jewish belief irrefutably, and opposing Christianity. In some ways, his work may be thought of as a summary of trends in Jewish philosophy from Rambam to his own time.

His philosophical work is *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* ("The Book of Principles"), and as its title indicates it is about the principal dogmas of Judaism. Unlike Rambam, who classified thirteen fundamental beliefs, and unlike his teacher Crescas, who listed six, Albo sums up all the beliefs behind the Torah in three ideas: The existence of God, Revelation, and Reward and Punishment. There can be no Divinely mandated way of life (*dat elohit*) unless God exists, unless He communicates His will to man (revelation) and unless He holds man accountable for his actions (reward and punishment). Each of these principles has other ideas from the Torah connected to them, but those ideas are "branches," not principles in and of themselves. After explaining these three principles and why they are necessary in the first section of his book, Albo next devoted one full section to each of them. Thus, the fourth section of the book is on reward and punishment, and it is there that Albo discusses prayer as one of its "branches."

As we said in chapter five of the present volume, Albo's discussion of prayer is the only comprehensive analysis of the topic in the entire literature

of medieval Jewish philosophy. Therefore, its importance cannot be underestimated. It is a full discussion, nine chapters in length (16–24), and has much to add to our appreciation of prayer. Happily, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* is also eminently readable. Unlike other medieval philosophic works (for instance, *Or Hashem* by his teacher Crescas), Albo meant his book to be appreciated by common Jews, so he explains his ideas at length, gives numerous examples, and employs a Hebrew style that is usually vivid and clear. We are also fortunate to have a clear and accurate translation of the book into English by Isaac Husik.<sup>1</sup> Husik's translation is reprinted here with some alterations.<sup>2</sup>

Albo's discussion of prayer has many similarities to that of Rabbi Hasdai Crescas. As you read, see how many of these you can find. Also consider the study questions at the end of each chapter.

## *Sefer ha-Ikkarim: Text*

### CHAPTER 16

Having treated of Providence, it is proper to follow it up with a discussion of prayer. For though prayer is not a fundamental principle of the Torah, nevertheless it is a branch growing out of Providence. The acceptance of prayer necessarily indicates Providence, as we said before. And on the other hand, every one who believes in Providence must believe that prayer will help him and save him from misfortune. If one does not pray in a time of trouble, it is either because he does not believe in Providence, or because, though he does believe in Providence, he doubts God's ability to save him—both of which are forms of unbelief—or because, though he believes in Providence and doubts not God's ability to save him, for God is all powerful, he doubts whether he is worthy of the privilege of having his prayer heard.

Now it is true that a man must never be righteous in his own eyes, nevertheless this should not prevent him from praying to God to satisfy his needs. For to refrain from prayer on this account indicates a belief that the good which comes to man from God is a reward for his good deeds and not due to God's mercy and kindness. But this opinion is incorrect, as we read in the Bible: "We do not present our supplications before Thee because of

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1. *Sefer ha-Ikkarim—Book of Principles*, ed. and trans. Isaac Husik (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1930). The text reprinted here is from volume four, part one, pp. 145–220.

2. I have changed Husik's text here by putting biblical and rabbinic references into the text in parenthesis, by simplifying his footnotes, and by occasionally adding brief explanatory notes of my own. I hope that all these changes will improve the text's readability.

our righteousness, but because of Thy great compassions" (Daniel 9:18). The kindness of God and the mercy He bestows upon all His creatures are based upon pure loving kindness, and are not in the nature of compensation, as God said to Job: "Who hath given Me anything beforehand, that I should repay him?" (Job 41:3). The Rabbis say (*Yalkut Shim'oni* on Numbers 15:38): If a man makes a *mezuzah* have I not given him the house? And if he attaches *zizit* (fringes) to his garment, have I not given him the garment?<sup>3</sup>

The proper belief, then, is that all benefits which come from God are due purely to His loving kindness, and are not compensation for one's good deeds. This being so, benefits may come from God whether the recipient deserves to receive them or not. For prayer confers a capacity upon a person who is not by nature fit to receive a given benefit. No one else except God can do anything like this unless the recipient has a capacity, natural or artificial; because all the superlunar powers are finite and can act only upon that which is prepared to receive their influence. As fire has the power to make warm, and water to make cold, so Mars has the power, for example, to destroy, to kill and to ruin. But it can not bestow the opposite of that which the recipient is prepared to receive or vary its activity, as the fire has no power to make cool. Similarly, Jupiter has the power to make prosperous and rich, but he can not change that indication and give the recipient the opposite, as water has not the power to make warm, except *per accidens*.<sup>4</sup> The same thing applies to the other superlunar powers.<sup>5</sup>

The Rabbis explain this matter in the Talmud: "When the wicked Nebuchadnezzar cast Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah into the fiery furnace, Yurkemi, the spirit of hail, came down before God and said, Lord of the world, let me go down and cool the furnace, and save the righteous men. Thereupon Gabriel rose before God, and said: This is not in consonance with the dignity of God, but let me, the spirit of fire, go and heat the furnace on the outside and cool it within so that there may be a miracle within a miracle" (*Pesahim* 118a). It is clear from this that Yurkemi only had the power to cool and Gabriel had the power only to heat, except when God desired otherwise. The superlunar powers, therefore, can not act upon the recipients unless the latter have the capacity, whether the influence comes upon the recipient through a visible property or an invisible. For example, drugs act upon those who take them, either through their natural qualities or through their properties, which are invisible qualities, according as the recipients are prepared to receive the quality or property in question.

Now when the recipient prepares himself to receive the influence which comes from the visible nature of a given star, as for example, to receive moisture from the moon or heat from the sun, there is no likelihood of an

3. In other words, God doesn't grant us things as payment for the mitzvot we do. His gifts are prerequisites for the mitzvot.

4. Husik's note: I.e., by virtue of the heat of fire which has made the water hot.

5. Keep in mind that astrology was considered a *science* by a great many medieval scholars (including Albo). It was part of medieval physics. Rambam was rare among the *rishonim* in that he denied the validity of astrology in its entirety.

erroneous opinion that the effect is due to the favor of the star. But if the recipient prepares himself to receive the influence of the star through one of those acts whose causes are unknown, like the acts of drugs which come from their properties, people are led into the erroneous opinion that the effect is due to the favor of the star. But it is not true. The fact is this, that just as the influence of the teacher affects the pupil who is prepared more than the one who is not prepared, though the teacher is not directing his instruction to the one more than the other, so the influence of the star reaches the one who is prepared more than the one who is unprepared, without any intention or will on the part of the star.

The error of the idolaters was just this, namely, that they thought that the influence which comes from the star is due to the favor of the star gained by doing those things which are of particular interest to the particular star, not knowing that the real reason is because those activities prepare the recipient. The error was due to the fact that the causes are unknown. For this reason they bowed down before the star and prayed to it, offered sacrifices, burned incense and poured out libations to it, thinking to obtain its favor through these rites.

The error here is clear, for the force of the higher powers is limited, and no one of them can do anything else than that which its nature determines. And its activity depends upon the preparation of the recipient and is not in the nature of a voluntary act. Baal Peor, for example, had the power to act as a purgative for those who performed the act of defecation before him. The Rabbis say that the priests fed the person with beets and gave him beer of *hizme* to drink (*Sandhedrin* 64a).<sup>6</sup> The purpose was to prepare the recipient for the effect, which followed in the person who defecated before it, whether he needed it or not, thus benefiting the one who needed it, and injuring and killing the one who needed it not, for the effect was not voluntary. This is why the Bible calls that service, "sacrifices of the dead": "They joined themselves also unto Baal of Peor, and ate the sacrifices of the dead" (Psalms 106:28). The point of the analogy is that just as the dead have not the power to will or not to will, so the stars have not the power to will or not to will. As the fire has not the power to refrain from burning the garment of the righteous man if he comes near it, nor the power to burn the garment of the wicked when he is far away, or if the object is such that it is not subject to being burned, so the star has no power to do good or evil except as its nature dictates and as the recipient is prepared for the effect. Therefore it is not proper to pray to it since it can not act voluntarily. God alone is the one to pray to, because His activities are voluntary. He can will or not, can do a thing as well as its opposite, can do a kindness gratis, i.e., whether the recipient is deserving or not, provided he prepares himself by prayer alone.

This is stated clearly in the Bible in many places, and especially in relation to Menasseh, son of Hezekiah, king of Judah, who was a thor-

6. *Shekhar shel hizma* is beer containing (instead of hops), *cuscuta* growing on *hizme*, a prickly shrub (jastrow).

oughly wicked man, and never had his like before or after in disobedience and wrongdoing. And yet we read: "And when he was in distress, he besought the Lord his God . . . and he prayed unto Him; and He was entreated of him, and heard his supplication, and brought him back to Jerusalem into his kingdom" (2 Chronicles 33:12-13). We learn from this two things, one is that even though a person is thoroughly wicked like Menasseh, he may become fit to receive divine grace through prayer. The second is that prayer is heard even though it is forced by distress, as the text testifies: "And when he was in distress. . . ."

This shows how wonderfully great is God's kindness to His creatures. For a human being under similar circumstances would say, "Why are ye come unto me now when ye are in distress?" (Judges 11:7). But God delights in loving-kindness, and His right hand is extended to receive penitents at all times. Thus the Psalmist says: "Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and He delivered them . . ." (Psalms 107:6). Jonah says: "I called out of mine affliction unto the Lord, and He answered me" (Jonah 2:3). He means, although I did not deserve to have my prayer in distress accepted, after I ran away from Him, nevertheless He did not forbear to answer me.

## QUESTIONS ON CHAPTER 16

1. Why did Albo begin his discussion of prayer at this point in his book, in the middle of his treatise on reward and punishment?
2. Explain the "error of the idolaters" in your own words.
3. Albo mentions the prayer of Menasseh as an example of a thoroughly evil man whose prayer was nonetheless accepted by God. This proves that prayer can be effective even if a person has no other merit.

The actual passage reads as follows: "In his distress, he entreated the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. He prayed to Him, and He granted his prayer, heard his plea, and returned him to Jerusalem his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord alone was God. . . . He removed the foreign Gods . . . and dumped them outside the city. . . . He rebuilt the altar of the Lord and offered on it sacrifices of well-being and thanksgiving, and commanded the people of Judah to worship the Lord God of Israel" (2 Chronicles 33:12-13).

Does anything in this passage contradict Albo's claim that it proves prayer can be effective even if a person has no other merit?

4. Mention at least three ways God's power differs from the superlunar power or the power of drugs.

## CHAPTER 17

All kinds of loving-kindness emanate and derive from God, and there is no other being who can bestow a kindness on any one. The reason is because



one can not expect an absolute kindness from any one unless the latter has the following four attributes.

1. He must be unchangeable; for if he is subject to change, the kindness coming from him can not be absolute because it will not be permanent. But God is the only unchangeable being as I explained in Book II, chapter 2.<sup>7</sup>
2. He must not require the aid of any other being in bestowing the kindness or benefit in question. For if he requires the aid of another, the recipient can not be sure of the continuance of that kindness unless the aid continues. The superlunar powers are a case in point. They indicate a certain event if a certain other condition or cause is there to assist them, for example, if the rising star is in its elevation,<sup>8</sup> or faces a favorable star, and the like. But there is no other being who requires no assistance except God, as the Bible says, "I am the Lord that maketh all things; That stretcheth forth the heavens alone; That spread abroad the earth by Myself" (Isaiah 44:24).
3. He must be equally able to do either of two opposed things, else the recipient would not be able to obtain his desire at all times. For a person sometimes needs one thing and sometimes its opposite, for example sometimes he has to make war, and sometimes he has need of peace. Now it is well known in relation to the superlunar powers that the star which indicates war does not indicate peace, and the star which indicates destruction does not indicate building up, and the star which indicates war has no power to change its indication into one of peace. Similarly the star which indicates disease does not indicate health. Hence the recipient of a kindness can never be sure that he will always have the kindness that he needs, unless the giver has equal ability to give either of two opposite things. But there is no one else who has this power except God, as we read: "I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace and create evil; I am the Lord that doeth all these things" (Isaiah 45:7).
4. The giver must be so situated that there is no other being who can prevent him from doing his will. For if there is one who can prevent him, then the recipient of the kindness can never be sure of obtaining the favor which he desires of the giver, for the latter may be prevented from doing it. Now it is clear that every being except God can be prevented by God, but no one can prevent God from doing His will, as we read: "Behold, He snatcheth away, who can hinder Him? Who will say unto Him: 'What doest Thou?'" (Job 9:12).

When these conditions are combined in the giver, the recipient is assured that he will obtain his desire and that the kindness he receives will be

7. Husik notes: Cf. also II, 19.

8. *Ba'al ha-tzome'ah* and *beit kevodo* are astrological terms. *Tzome'ah* means rising. Other medieval writers such as Ibn Ezra used those terms as well (Husik).

permanent. Now since there is no one but God who combines in him these four conditions, it is clear that one should not desire or hope for any favor from any one else. The Bible makes this clear in the Song of Moses: "See now that I, even I, am He, and there is no God with Me . . ." (Deuteronomy 32:39). The meaning is as follows: The Gentiles, who oppress the Jews, think that God can not save them. "Where are their gods," they say, "The rock in whom they trusted; who did eat the fat of their sacrifices . . . ?" (Deuteronomy 32:37-38). These words indicate that they think the God of Israel is like the other superlunar powers, that He is subject to change, or that He needs the help of another god, or that He is not equally able to do all things and opposite things, or that there is another being who can prevent Him. Hence the text explains that the God of Israel is not like the other superlunar powers, as they think, but on the contrary that God is eternal and unchanging. This is the meaning of the expression: "See now that I, even I, am He," i.e., there is no other being in the world who can say about himself, "I, I am he," except God.

The prophet says: "To whom then will ye liken Me, that I should be equal? saith the Holy One" (Isaiah 40:25), i.e., that should be equal to Me in deserving the name holy. For every other being except God changes from day to day, and is not to-day what he was yesterday, having changed since then. Hence he can not use the expression, "I, I am he," for he is not always the same in attribute. God, on the other hand, who is not subject to change, can say of Himself: "I, I am He." Similarly the prophet says: "I, even I, am the Lord" (Isaiah 43:11). The repetition of the pronoun can apply only to God, who is to-day what He was yesterday without any change. This is a reference to the first attribute. Then Moses says: "And there is no God with Me" (Deuteronomy 32:39). This means, I do not need any one else to help Me in My work, and refers to the second attribute. Then he continues: "I kill, and I make alive." This means, I can do equally either of two opposite things—an allusion to the third attribute. Then, alluding to the fourth attribute, he ends up: "And there is none that can deliver out of My hand." This means, there is no being who can prevent Me from doing what I desire. And since there is no other being who combines in himself these four requirements, no kindness can come from any one else but God. Hence the Psalmist says: "O Israel, hope in the Lord; For with the Lord there is mercy" (Psalms 130:7). The meaning is, hope in the Lord, because that which you desire is not a matter of compensation, but an act of loving-kindness, and there is no being but God who can do kindness, for He alone is the source of all favor and kindness: "For with the Lord there is mercy," and not with any one else.

Prayer should therefore be directed to Him alone and to no one else. For how can a man pray to one who can not grant his prayer or request? Reason dictates that one should pray only to one who is able to grant one's request. For the impulse to pray comes from reason. It is true that we read in the Bible: "Lord, Thou hast heard the desire of the humble," (Psalms 10:17) from which it may appear that the impulse to pray is due to the faculty of desire, but it is not so. As soon as the power of desire begins to act, the rational faculty is aroused and reflects and seeks for a way to realize the

desire. And when it determines that it can not be attained except through God who can do all things, and bestows kindness even upon those who are not deserving, it comes at once to the conclusion that God is the one to pray to.

It is because the first beginning comes from the power of desire that the Bible connects the hearing of prayer with the power of desire. Hence the Bible says: "Lord, Thou hast heard the desire of the humble," as if prayer came from the faculty of desire. But it is not so. Prayer is due to the power of reason, which prompts man to do good and to love God, whereas the power of desire has the opposite tendency. For this reason the biblical verse ends up with the words: "Thou wilt direct their heart, Thou wilt cause Thine ear to attend," to indicate that God does not hear the desire of the humble until the rational power is prepared for prayer and to cleave to God. First, "Thou wilt direct their heart," and then, "cause Thine ear to attend."

Daniel was also told: "From the first day that thou didst set thy heart to understand, and to humble thyself before thy God, thy words were heard" (Daniel 10:12). In explanation of this our Rabbis say (*Ta'anit* 8b): "From this we learn that the intention to fast, even before the actual fasting, helps one in having his prayer received, by reason of the fact that his heart is prepared." This is the meaning of the biblical expression: "And it shall come to pass that, before they call, I will answer" (Isaiah 65:24). The meaning is, when the rational power prepares itself to pray or to submit to God and fast, even before the actual praying and fasting take place, I will answer; and while they are talking about prayer and fasting I will hear them, even before they actually begin their prayer; provided, however, that the rational power has decided that the thing in question is a proper thing to pray for, and that it is possible of attainment, not merely so far as the giver is concerned—for God can do everything—but that the possibility is there also so far as the recipient is concerned, i.e., that he is properly prepared to receive the favor in question. For if the recipient is not capable of receiving so great a kindness, if it is something which it is not in his power to receive, it is wrong to pray for it. Thus it is wrong to pray to God that He should make one king of the whole world like Alexander the Great, though it is possible so far as the giver is concerned, since God can do everything. The reason is because the recipient is not capable of receiving so great a favor, for not every one is fit to rule over all the inhabitants of the earth, as there may be among them some one who is better prepared for it than he, and God would not deprive the other one on account of this one. The kindness of God invoked by prayer shows itself to the recipient according to the power of the latter to receive. This is what the Psalmist had in mind when he said: "Commit thy way unto the Lord . . ." (Psalms 37:5). The meaning is that it is the wisdom of God that determines what things are beneficial to man, and who is worthy to receive His benefits.

## QUESTIONS ON CHAPTER 17

1. Is *kavvana* an emotional experience or an intellectual realization for Albo? What is the relationship of the rational intellect and the emotions during prayer?

2. If prayer "prepares" man to receive God's bounty through an intellectual realization, what far-reaching practical implications could this idea have were it taken to an extreme?
3. For Albo, how can a person ever know if he is "prepared" to receive a certain good from God (so that he should pray for it)?

## CHAPTER 18

The reason which leads men to doubt the efficacy of prayer is the same as that which leads them to deny God's knowledge. Their argument is as follows: Either God has determined that a given person shall receive a given benefit, or He has not so determined. If He has determined, there is no need of prayer; and if He has not determined, how can prayer avail to change God's will that He should now determine to benefit the person, when He had not so determined before? For God does not change from a state of willing to a state of not willing, or vice versa. For this reason they say that right conduct is of no avail for receiving a good from God. And similarly they say that prayer does not avail to enable one to receive a benefit, or to be saved from an evil which has been decreed against him.

Job argues in this manner in the name of the wicked and inclines to it. Skeptically he asks, If God takes notice of human conduct, why does He not punish the wicked for believing in this manner? "Wherefore do the wicked live, become old, yea, wax mighty in power? Their seed is established in their sight with them, and their offspring before their eyes. . . . Yet they say unto God: 'Depart from us; for we desire not the knowledge of Thy ways. What is the Almighty, that we should serve Him? And what profit should we have, if we pray unto Him?'" (Job 21:7, 15). This shows their opinion that right conduct is of no benefit: "What is the Almighty that we should serve Him?" and that prayer is of no avail: "And what profit should we have, if we pray unto Him?" The reason for this belief is their opinion that when a certain evil has been determined for any one, it can not be annulled in any way.

That Job was inclined to sympathize with this idea appears from the remark which follows: "Lo, their prosperity is not in their hand; the counsel of the wicked is far from me" (Job 21:16). The meaning is, I see that their prosperity is not in their hands, i.e., they can not increase their goods by right conduct, nor do their evil deeds injure them by taking away from them the benefits which they get. Hence I say: "The counsel of the wicked is far from me." That is, the divine plan which decides that these wicked men should spend their lives in prosperity is far from my understanding. Therefore I say that everything is pre-ordained, for if everything were not pre-ordained, and right conduct were of any benefit, the wicked should have misfortune for their deeds. But it is not so, for: "How oft is it that the lamp of the wicked is put out? That their calamity cometh upon them? That He distributeth pains in His anger?" (V. 17). That is, how often does it happen that they are punished for their evil deeds, and that God sends misfortunes upon them in His anger on account of their wrong doing? From

this it seems that Job inclined to the opinion of the wicked men who said that everything is pre-ordained, and that neither right conduct nor prayer can avail to annul the pre-determined event.

But this opinion is not true, for the influences from above come down upon the recipient when he is in a certain degree and state of preparation to receive them. And if a person does not prepare himself, he withholds the good from himself. For example, if it has determined from on high that a given person's crops shall prosper in a given year, and he neglects to plow or sow his land that year, then God may bring the most abundant rain upon the land, but his crops will not prosper, seeing that he has not plowed or sowed. He withheld the good from himself because he did not prepare himself to receive it.

Our idea therefore is that when a benefit is determined in favor of any one, it is conditional upon a certain degree of right conduct. This must be taken to be a general principle as regards the promises in the Bible. In the same way, when a certain evil is determined upon some one, it is also conditional upon his being wicked in a certain degree or of being predisposed to it. And if the degree of wickedness or predisposition thereto changes, the pre-determined event or fate changes also necessarily for the better or the worse.

The matter is similar to the hypothetical case of a king who made a decree that all the uncircumcised persons in a given country should be killed, or should receive a talent of gold. Now if one of the people has himself circumcised, there is no doubt that the decree is of no effect so far as he is concerned, whether for good or for evil, by reason of the new state into which the person has been brought. The effort, therefore, to do good is essential everywhere, for it serves as a preparation for the reception of the divine influence or for the annulment of a divine decree.

This is in agreement with the statement of our Rabbis (*Bereshit Rabbah* 59): "Rabba came to Mamla, and saw that all the people had black hair.<sup>9</sup> He inquired for the reason and was told that they were descendants of Eli, concerning whom it is said: 'And all the increase of thy house shall die young men' (1 Samuel 2:33). Then he said to them: Go and study the Torah, concerning which it is written: 'For she is thy life and the length of thy days' (Deuteronomy 30:20)." From this it is clear that divine decrees are conditional upon the recipient being in a certain state and degree of preparation. And if that changes, the decree also changes. This is the reason why the Rabbis say that a change of name may avail to nullify a decree, as also change of conduct may have the same effect (*Rosh Hashanah* 16b; *Bereshit Rabbah* 44:12).

In this way repentance benefits a wicked man, for through repentance he becomes another person, as it were, concerning whom no such decree was made. Take the case of Ahab. The Bible says concerning him: "But there was none like unto Ahab, who did give himself over to do that which was

9. I.e., he saw only young men, which indicated that the inhabitants were short-lived (Husik).

evil in the sight of the Lord" (1 Kings 21:25), and a divine decree was made against him. And then, because he fasted, and covered himself with sackcloth, and humbled himself before God, it was said to Elijah: "Because he humbleth himself before Me, I will not bring the evil in his days; but in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house" (v. 29). This shows that when a decree is made upon a wicked person, it is conditional upon his maintaining his state of wickedness. But if he changes that state through repentance, he, as it were, changes into another person upon whom that decree was not made.

In this way it is clear that prayer and right conduct help to prepare the person to receive the good influence or to nullify the evil that has been decreed concerning him, because he changes from the evil state in which he was. Zophar alludes to this argument when he blames Job for not praying to God to deliver him from his misfortune, and for not preparing himself to nullify the decree: "If thou set thy heart aright and stretch out thy hands toward Him—If iniquity be in thy hand, put it far away. . . . Surely then shalt thou lift up thy face without spot . . ." (Job 11:13–15). That is, if you set your heart to pray and to improve your conduct, there is no doubt that through prayer and right conduct you will escape from these troubles. From this it is clear that prayer and right conduct are always helpful in nullifying a divine decree. Our Rabbis also say (*Rosh Hashanah* 18a): "The cry [of prayer] is good for a man both before the divine decision and after."

As for the objection that the divine will can not be changed by prayer, the answer is that the divine will in the first place is that the decree should be realized if the person in question continues in the same state, and that the decree should be changed if the person's state changes.

The other problem, namely that God's knowledge would change as the man's state changes through prayer, is related to the problem of the relation of God's knowledge to the category of the contingent. Now just as we do not find it necessary that God's knowledge should change because the contingent is a real category, so we do not find it necessary that it should change because of prayer, but we believe that as God's knowledge does not change because of the existence of the contingent, so it does not change because of the efficacy of prayer. We believe that the contingent is real because experience testifies to it, and similarly we believe that prayer has the effect of nullifying a divine decree because experience testifies to it, as we shall see, and though we do not know how to reconcile God's changeless knowledge with the efficacy of prayer, as we do not know how to reconcile it with the contingent, we do not on this account deny what experience proves, namely that God listens to prayer and grants the person's request, whatever it may be.

This is the answer which Eliphaz gave to Job when he saw that Job was inclined to accept the view of the wicked, who say: "What is the Almighty that we should serve him? And what profit should we have, if we pray unto Him?" (Job 21:15). In answer to this Eliphaz says: "And thou sayest: 'What doth God know? Can He judge through the dark cloud? Thick clouds are a covering to Him, that He seeth not . . .'" (Job 22:13–14). That is, since you incline to the opinion of the wicked, who say: "What profit should we have,

if we pray unto Him?" thus denying the efficacy of prayer in order to save God's changeless knowledge, you must also in the same way deny God's knowledge of the contingent in order to save his changeless knowledge: "And thou sayest: 'What doth God know?'" Your opinion seems to be that the world is ruled by unchanging law, which Eliphaz calls "The way of the world," when he says to Job: "Wilt thou keep the way of the world which wicked men have trodden? . . . who said unto God: 'Depart from us;' and what could the Almighty do unto them?" (Job 22:15-17). He calls those men wicked who say that the world is ruled by unchanging law, because they deny the efficacy of right conduct and prayer. Hence he concludes: "If thou return to the Almighty, thou shalt be built up . . . thou shalt make thy prayer unto Him, and He will hear thee . . ." (vv. 23,27), alluding, as it were, to the fact that his misfortunes came upon him because he believed that his prosperity had been due not to God, but to nature; and he entertained the same belief about the origin of his misfortune and hence he did not pray to God concerning them. Eliphaz, therefore, says to him that if he returns to God and prays to Him and acknowledges that everything came to him from God, He will hear his prayer, will save him from his sufferings and will prosper his affairs. Hence he says: "Thou shalt make thy prayer unto Him, and He will hear thee . . . and the Almighty be thy treasure, and precious silver unto thee" (v. 25), i.e., through prayer your affairs will prosper. The Bible also testifies to the truth of this when it says: "And the Lord changed the fortune of Job, when he prayed for his friends" (Job 42:10). When he came to believe that prayer has efficacy, he prayed to God, and immediately God changed his fortune.

### QUESTIONS ON CHAPTER 18

1. What kind of people, do you think, were the ones in Albo's time who "doubted the efficacy of prayer," on the basis of the questions that he cites from them?
2. Albo wrote that repentance, prayer, and right conduct help "change" a person and prepare him to receive good influences from God. So is there really any difference between these three activities? If so, what is it?
3. Albo wrote that "experience" proves God listens to prayer. What experience do you think he means?
4. Albo solved the paradoxes of prayer he raised in the beginning of the chapter. How did he solve them, and how did he change the nature of the experience of prayer by doing so?

### CHAPTER 19

The blessings conferred upon persons by the prophets, the righteous men and the pious are a subject that has caused perplexity to commentators, who have not been able to explain the matter properly. Their argument is

as follows: These blessings are either in the nature of a prayer or of a prognostication of the future. If they are a prayer, why was Isaac so terrified when he found that he had blessed some one other than Esau, exclaiming as he did, "Who then is he that hath taken venison . . . yea, and he shall be blessed?" (Genesis 27:33). He could have prayed again for Esau as he had prayed before for Jacob. And there is no doubt that his second prayer for Esau, made voluntarily, would have been more likely to be heard than the one for Jacob, which had been obtained through fraud. On the other hand, if the blessings are prognostications, why was Esau so indignant, exclaiming as he did, "He took away my birthright; and, behold, now he hath taken away my blessing?" (v. 36). Also how could Isaac say to him: "Behold, I have made him thy lord, and all his brethren have I given to him for servants"? (V. 27). Isaac had done nothing, he had merely foretold by prophetic inspiration the things that would happen to the person who received the blessing. Why then should Isaac or Esau have been indignant?

A great deal has been said on this matter. The best interpretation that has so far been agreed upon is that the blessing is a composite of both prognostication and prayer in the following way. The prophet sees through his prophetic inspiration what will happen to the recipient of the blessing, and prays for him to increase the good that is to come to him. For example, the prophet sees that the person in question will prosper as a tiller of the soil, and he blesses him to the effect that the produce of his field may be a hundred fold. Or if he sees that the person in question will prosper as a breeder of cattle, he will bless him by praying that his cattle should multiply many fold, and should not drop their young prematurely; and so on, they say, with all other kinds of prosperity. Any difficulty which arises from the prayer aspect of the blessing is solved by bringing forward the aspect of prognostication, and a difficulty arising from the element of prognostication is answered by emphasizing the element of prayer. Adopting this interpretation, they have to make a distinction between the blessings conferred by a prophet and those pronounced by the righteous men and the pious who are not prophets.

Against the above interpretation are also all those blessings conferred upon Israel by the priests, in which there is no element of prognostication at all, unless we say that all these are in the nature of prayers, while the blessings of Isaac, who was a prophet, had the element of prognostication in them. This is the reason why Isaac was so much troubled. Esau was very dear to him, and therefore he was grieved when he saw the good fortune that was destined for Jacob and the prosperity which he was destined to enjoy at the expense of Esau. But the difficulty remains, if prayer avails in blessings, why did not Isaac pray for Esau that he should be more prosperous than Jacob, as the righteous men pray for those who receive a blessing at their hands? Also why did he not say to Esau that the blessings were prognostications of the future and that Esau had lost nothing by Isaac's blessing Jacob? This would have been a very proper thing to do, so that Esau should not hate Jacob for the blessing which he received from his father.

My opinion therefore is that the blessings are not declarations of the



future at all. A blessing is a prayer plus the bestowal upon the recipient of the capacity to receive the divine influence. Celestial influences descend upon the recipients through a chain of intermediate agents and in varying degrees, provided, however, that the recipients are worthy, and occupy a certain definite relation and order, and are in addition prepared to receive the influence in question. And if the transmission is interrupted in any of the intermediate agents, or the relation or order is changed, or the recipient is not prepared, the influence or relation gets confused, and the divine influence does not rest upon the person if the order is changed. For this reason there must be in the recipient the proper preparation to enable him to receive the influence in question.

But if the recipient is not himself prepared to receive the divine influence, he may be prepared by a prophet or a righteous or pious man, and thus the one who bestows the blessing becomes an intermediate agent in causing the influence in question to descend. This is the reason for the laying on of hands by those who gave the blessing upon those who received them. The purpose was to confer upon the recipient of the blessing the capacity or preparation to receive the influence or good in question. Thus the pious or righteous man who conferred the blessing was a sort of channel conducting the divine influence. We found similarly that the prophetic inspiration rested, through the mediation of a prophet, upon those who were not fit, provided they had some measure of preparation. Thus God said to Moses: "Take thee Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is spirit, and lay thy hand upon him" (Numbers 27:18). The degree of the influence received corresponds to the quality of the one who lays on his hands or who confers the blessing. For this reason when Elisha, in answer to the question of Elijah: "Ask what I shall do for thee, before I am taken from thee," said: "I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me," Elijah replied: "Thou hast asked a hard thing" (2 Kings 2:9-10). For a person can not give to another as a preparation more than he has himself. Therefore he said to him that if he saw him after he was taken away, his request would be granted. For Elijah would surely stand on a higher plane after being taken away than before, and would therefore be able to bestow upon Elisha twice as much as Elijah had before he was taken away, a thing that he could not have done before he was taken away.

The expression, "Thou hast asked a hard thing," shows that the words, "A double portion of thy spirit," have not the same meaning as the words, "Shall acknowledge the first-born . . . by giving him a double portion . . .," (Deuteronomy 21:17) which are used in connection with the law of the first-born, as some commentators have said. For if this were the case, he would not have said, "Thou hast asked a hard thing." For Elisha was on his own account more fit to prophesy than the other sons of the prophets, although they waited upon Elijah before Elisha and prepared themselves for prophecy more than he did. This we learn from the fact that Elijah was told on Mount Carmel: "And Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-Meholah shalt thou anoint to be prophet in thy room" (1 Kings 19:16). Since therefore Elisha was the "first-born," so to speak, among the sons of the prophets, it would not have been a hard thing to ask that he should receive a double portion of what

the others received. The truth of the matter is that he asked for a double portion of the spirit of Elijah as it was before Elijah was taken away. And his request was granted, for Elijah is credited with eight miracles, while Elisha had sixteen miracles to his credit.

The Rabbis support this view in the first chapter of the treatise *Hullin* (7b). It also appears from the text of the Bible that Elijah appeared to Elisha after he was taken away, as the Rabbis say that he appeared to some of the pious men of the Talmud. We read: "He took up also the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and went back, and stood by the bank of the Jordan . . . and said: where is the Lord, the God of Elijah? And when he also had smitten the waters, they were divided hither and thither; and Elisha went over" (2 Kings 2:13-14). Since the Bible says, "And Elisha went over," and does not say simply, "And he went over," we infer that Elisha was not alone in smiting the waters, but that Elijah was with him, having appeared to him at that moment, and Elijah also is referred to in the words, "And when he also had smitten the waters."

I find a similar interpretation ascribed to the ancient commentators, namely that Elijah appeared to Elisha at that moment and that then the spirit of Elijah rested upon Elisha, and the latter's request was granted in that he obtained a double portion of Elijah's spirit, since he saw him after he had been taken away from him. We also find, after Elijah had been taken away, that: "There came a writing to him [Jehoram son of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah] from Elijah the prophet" (2 Chronicles 21:12); from which it seems that Elijah at that time appeared among men and corrected their conduct.

In reference to laying on of hands there is no doubt that it is more effective when the person upon whom the hands are laid has much preparation than when he has little. For this reason Jacob laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim, who had much more preparation than Menasseh. For he desired that through his instrumentality a generous blessing should rest upon Ephraim in accordance with his abundant preparation. On the other hand, since Menasseh had little preparation for receiving the divine influence, he thought it sufficient to lay his left hand upon him in order that through the blessing of Jacob he might receive the influence which he was capable of receiving.

The same purpose is intended in the priestly benediction. The priests blessed the people in order that they (the priests) might be the intermediate agents to cause the divine influence to rest upon the recipients of the blessing in accordance with each one's preparation. The lifting of their hands at the time of the blessing was a sort of laying on of hands. The priests blessed all Israel, or the congregation, because the many collectively are more prepared to receive divine influence than an individual. For it is impossible that there should not be among them some one who has preparation for receiving some measure of divine influence through the mediation of the priests. Of similar nature are the blessings which the righteous or the pious confer upon their recipients. The purpose is that the divine influence may rest upon the recipient through their mediation, as we explained in connection with prophecy in the eleventh chapter of the Third Book of this treatise.

The question may be asked, how can the righteous or the pious man be

an instrument through which a blessing may come upon a person when the pious man himself is poor and dependent upon the bounty of others. The answer is given by the Rabbis, who say that the merits of the righteous avail others, but do not avail the righteous man himself (cf. *Hullin* 86a).

After the influence is transmitted to the recipient of the blessing through the instrumentality of the blesser and in accordance with the amount of preparation of the recipient, the blesser has no power to stop the influence and prevent it from descending upon the recipient. For it descends of its own accord, the blesser being merely an instrument for the blessing to reach the recipient. Therefore though the instrument be removed, the blessing does not depart. It is the same as if a person drew [by means of an aqueduct] the water of a spring to a garden in order to promote the growth of the plants. The author of the conduit might cease to exist, but the stream made by the channel would not cease to water the garden. Similarly a person makes windows in a dark house so that the light of the sun may enter. The artisan who made the windows may disappear, but the light of the sun will not cease to illuminate the dark house.

This is the meaning of the words Isaac used when he was troubled exceedingly: "And have blessed him, yea, and he will be blessed" (Genesis 27:33). The meaning is, he will be blessed whether I will or no since I blessed him. The words, "Yea, and he will be blessed," form part of the reason for Isaac's alarm, the meaning being, I can not put a stop to the influence which I was instrumental in drawing upon him. It is like the case of a person who orders a goldsmith to make beautiful vessels of gold with beautiful figures engraved upon them, for a friend of the goldsmith. The artist, thinking that the vessels are really for his friend, engraves them most beautifully, and works upon them with zest and joy. Then he finds out that the vessels are not intended for his friend at all. Undoubtedly the goldsmith is very much disappointed and troubled, but he can not prevent the beautiful engravings from being on those vessels, even though he knows that they are intended for his enemy. This is why Isaac said to Esau: "Behold, I have made him thy lord . . ." (v. 37), i.e., through my instrumentality and through the means of his preparation all this influence has already come to him, and I have no power to stop it, since it has already been drawn, "And what then shall I do for thee, my son?" Then Esau replied: "Hast thou but one blessing, my father?" (v. 38) meaning that Isaac should give him another blessing that should not conflict with the previous one. And Isaac did so, but he included in Esau's blessing the words: "And thou shalt serve thy brother" (v. 40), for he could not dispense with them. So much concerning the subject of blessings.

## QUESTIONS ON CHAPTER 19

1. In what ways does Albo's chapter on blessings go beyond that of his teacher's (Rabbi Hasdai Crescas, reading 5) on the same topic?
2. How does it make sense for "preparation" or "capacity" to be "bestowed"?

3. What mistake was made by those who thought Elisha's request had to do with the laws of the firstborn?
4. Why do the *kohanim* bless the whole congregation at once? Compare Albo's answer to this question to Rabbi Yehuda Halevi's reasons why community prayer is so important (reading 3).
5. Can *anyone* get the capacity to receive God's influence through a blessing? Does the idea that this capacity cannot be removed raise any theological or moral issues?
6. What is Albo's final interpretation of Isaac's blessing and the trouble that it caused?

## CHAPTER 20

Prayer is, indeed, one of the commandments of the Torah, as our Rabbis explain in *Sifre* (41). The words, "And to serve Him with all your heart" (Deuteronomy 10:12), they say, refer to prayer. The Rabbis also say: "Be as careful about a light commandment as about a weighty one, for thou knowest not the reward of the commandments" (*Avot* 2:1; *Nedarim* 39b). This latter remark does not mean that all commandments are rewarded alike, and that there is no distinction of value and measure of reward between one commandment and another. The meaning is rather as one might say concerning medicinal drugs, be as careful about an unimportant drug as about an important one, for they are all of great value to the body. This would not mean that some drugs are not more valuable than others. It would mean simply that though rhubarb, for example, is very valuable, and *saranjun* is not so valuable, still one should be careful of both, though they are not equally valuable, because each has a specific property which is beneficial to the human body as a whole. For just as rhubarb has the property of curing diseases of the liver, so *saranjun* has the property of curing diseases of the feet, the thighs and the knees, which is also beneficial to the human body. At the same time, however, each one of them has its own specific value in its place, and in this their values differ. Thus rhubarb has the property of curing a vital organ,<sup>10</sup> whereas *saranjun*, though it has its own specific property, can not cure a vital organ.

The same thing is true of the commandments. Although every one of them has a common property and benefit as being a divine commandment—a value common to all the commandments—and therefore we should be careful about a light commandment as well as a weighty one, nevertheless their values are not equal, for every one has its own peculiar property and its own peculiar benefit, as being the specific commandment that it is. And in this respect some must be superior to others.

Therefore I say that though prayer is one of the commandments of the

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10. In ancient and medieval science, the body's life-force was thought to be controlled by the liver. This is also what Albo means when he describes the liver as a "vital organ."

Torah and is rewarded in a general way like any other, nevertheless it is much superior to all the others. For every commandment by itself has appertaining to it a specific reward. Thus in connection with the commandment not to take the mother bird together with the young, we read, "That it may be well with thee, and that thou mayest prolong thy days" (Deuteronomy 22:7). And in relation to charity we read: "That the Lord thy God may bless thee in all thine increase and in all the work of thy hands" (Deuteronomy 15:16).<sup>11</sup> But the specific property of prayer is a general benefit which is available for all things. For we find that it avails in curing illness, as in the case of Hezekiah, where we read: "I have heard thy prayer . . . behold, I will heal thee; on the third day thou shalt go up unto the house of the Lord" (2 Kings 20:5). It is also effective to deliver from death. Thus, when Israel committed the sin of the golden calf, Moses was told: "Let me alone, that I may destroy them" (Deuteronomy 9:14), and Moses saved them by his prayer. Similarly, Jonah was saved by his prayer from the bowels of the fish.

Prayer is also efficacious in causing barren women to bear children, as we find: "And Isaac entreated the Lord for his wife . . . and the Lord let Himself be entreated of him, and Rebbekah his wife conceived" (Genesis 25:21). Hannah also was remembered as a result of her prayer. Prayer avails also in time of famine, as we read: "And there was a famine in the days of David three years . . . and David sought the face of the Lord" (2 Samuel 21:1). Prayer avails also in time of war. Thus in the war of Sennacherib the Bible says: "And Hezekiah the king, and Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz, prayed because of this, and cried to heaven. And the Lord sent an angel, who cut off all the mighty men of valour, and the leaders and captains, in the camp of the king of Assyria" (2 Chronicles 32:20-21).

Prayer is thus a universal balm, good for all kinds of diseases and poisons, whether hot or cold, unlike other kinds of theriaca, which are good only for particular diseases, some only for hot poison, some only for cold. Not one of them is good for both hot and cold poison and for contrary diseases, except for great theriaca only. Similarly prayer is good for all things, even contrary things. Thus Moses said in his prayer: "Remember Abraham . . ." (Exodus 32:13) while Asaph said: "Remember not against us the iniquities of our forefathers" (Psalms 79:8). We see, therefore, that prayer is good for remembering as well as forgetting. There is no other commandment that is good for all things except prayer. This is the meaning of the statement of the Rabbis that the verse: "And ye shall serve the Lord your God . . ." (Exodus 23:25), refers not to service by means of sacrifices, which is confined to one place, but to service which is good everywhere (*Baba Kamma* 92b; *Bab Mezi'a* 107b). Nor can this service be compared to that which a servant does for his master, for God needs not anybody's service. Necessarily, therefore, this service consists in mentioning God's praises, acknowledging that all

11. Albo probably meant 14:29, which speaks of the tithe given to the poor, promising "so that the Lord thy God may bless you in all the enterprises you undertake (cf. Husik)."

things come from Him, requesting God to supply our needs in supplicating Him and acknowledging that we have no other helper and support outside of Him. This is divine service.

As the Rabbis found in the verse above cited and the one following it four general things are obtainable by prayer alone, and not by any other commandments or services, they say that the service mentioned here denotes prayer, or service of the heart. Thus we read here in reference to this service: "And He will bless thy bread and thy water," and in the days of David we find that prayer was good for famine, as we said before. Similarly we read here: "And I will take sickness away from the midst of thee," and in the case of Hezekiah we find that he was cured by prayer. Again, we read here: "None shall miscarry, nor be barren, in thy land" (Exodus 23:26), and we find that Hannah was helped by prayer. Further, we read here: "The number of thy days I will fulfil," and we find that Hezekiah and the Israelites after they made the golden calf were saved from death by prayer. We also read here: "I will send My terror before thee, and will discomfit all the people . . ." (Exodus 23:27), and we find in the days of Hezekiah that Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, and his camp were destroyed as a result of prayer. We find also that prayer is good for all troubles, as we learn from the prayer of Solomon: "If there be in the land famine, if there be pestilence, if there be blasting or mildew, locust or caterpillar . . . whatsoever plague, whatsoever sickness there be . . . what prayer and supplication soever be made . . . hear Thou in heaven . . ." (1 Kings 8:37). Prayer is also good for salvation from distress and captivity. Thus when Israel was in Egypt we read: "And they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage. And God heard their groaning . . ." (Exodus 2:23-24). Moreover through the prayers of Daniel and Ezra the Israelites returned from captivity.

We find, therefore, that prayer is like a universal balm, which cures all diseases, and is good for all bodies, and therefore for all kinds of people. Thus Solomon says: "Moreover concerning the stranger that is not of Thy people Israel . . . when he shall come and pray . . ." (1 Kings 8:41-42). Prayer is good even for absolutely wicked men, as was stated in the sixteenth chapter of this Book in connection with the prayer of Menasseh.

## QUESTIONS ON CHAPTER 20

1. Can you sum up the main idea of this chapter in one sentence? Can you find two places where Albo did this himself?
2. Do you feel that thinking of prayer as a "universal balm" (an all-purpose drug) enhances the experience or demeans it somehow? (Or neither?) What about the idea that mitzvot have hidden effects like medicines?

## CHAPTER 21

There is a great difficulty in connection with the subject of prayer. There was no greater man than Moses, the chief of all prophets, and yet though

he prayed to God that he might be allowed to enter the land of Israel, he was not answered. Thus we read: "And I besought the Lord. . . . Let me go over, I pray Thee . . . and the Lord said unto me: 'Let it suffice thee . . .'" (Deuteronomy 3:23-26). This would seem to indicate that a thing decreed by God can not be changed by prayer. This being so, one may very well say that it is in vain to serve God and that there is no advantage in praying to Him, since that which has been decreed can not be annulled.

The solution of this problem is that prayer does avail, at any rate before the matter in question has been finally decreed, and it avails also after the decision if the latter is not accompanied by an oath. Our Rabbis also say (*Rosh Hashanah* 18a): "Prayer is good for a man both before the decision and after," as we infer from the case of Hezekiah, who was told: "Set thy house in order; for thou shalt die and not live" (Isaiah 38:1). And shortly after we read: "I have heard thy prayer . . . behold, I will add unto thy days . . ." (v. 5). This was a change after the decision, as our Rabbis say (*Berakot* 10a). In the case of Moses, however, the decree was accompanied by an oath, for we read: "Therefore ye shall not bring . . ." (Numbers 20:12), and our Rabbis say that the expression, "therefore" (*laken*), indicates an oath, inferring this from the words, "And therefore I have sworn unto the house of Eli . . ." (1 Samuel 3:14). This is the reason why the prayer of Moses was of no avail.

There is a difference, however, between an individual and a community. A decree announced concerning an individual can not be reversed if it was accompanied by an oath, whereas a decree concerning a community may be reversed by prayer. This will be seen to follow from the sequence of thought in the text.

Accordingly, in order to make the matter clear, I will explain the language used in the prayer of Moses to make clear the connection of thought. In the beginning he says: "And I besought (*vaethanan*) the Lord." Now the Rabbis say that the word *hanan* (to beseech) denotes asking a favor gratis (*hinnam*) (*Berakot* 34b); their reason being because the word *hinnam* (gratis) is derived from the root *hanan*. The idea is that one should not, in praying to God, support his claim by his good deeds or his own merit, for, as Eliphaz said: "What is man that he should be clean? And he that is born of a woman, that he should be righteous?" (Job 15:14). The talmudic sages (*Berakot* 10b) find fault with Hezekiah who based his prayer on his own merit, and they say that because he based his request on his own merit, God granted his request for the merit of others, and he was told: "I will defend this city to save it, for Mine own sake, and for My servant David's sake" (2 Kings 19:34). Moses, accordingly, did not support his prayer on his own merit, but requested a favor gratuitously. Hence he said: "O Lord God, Thou hast begun . . ." (Deuteronomy 3:24), i.e., it has always been Thy way to show me kindness gratis. Thou hast in the beginning, of Thy own accord, at the burning bush, shed Thy prophetic influence upon me, though I was neither worthy nor prepared.

Our Rabbis in *Sifre* explain it in the same way: "Thou hast begun to show Thy servant wonders and strength," as it is said: "I will turn aside now, and see this great sight" (Exodus 3:3). It is clear, therefore, that the Rabbis refer

to the expression: "Thou hast begun," to the beginning of Moses's prophetic call. Moses said in effect, O Lord, Thou needest not hesitate to show me a kindness even though I do not deserve it, or to do me a favor gratis, for it has been Thy way with me. Thou of Thy own accord, didst begin at the burning bush to show Thy servant, etc. Since, therefore, this has been Thy way with me, do me this kindness also which I ask: "Let me go over, I pray Thee, and see the good land. . . ." (This attitude is well expressed in the words: "Save us, O God of our salvation" [1 Chronicles 16:35]). What is there to keep Thee from doing this kindness to me? The decree of death that has been made concerning me can only be due to one of three causes. It is either in the nature of punishment from Thee for my sins, or it is my fate as determined by the stars, or my time has come to die. These are the three fixed causes for a person's death. Thus David said concerning Saul: "Nay, but the Lord shall smite him; or his day shall come to die; or he shall go down into battle, and be swept away" (1 Samuel 26:10), indicating that there are three kinds of death, penal, natural and accidental. "The Lord shall smite him," denotes penal death, death as a punishment for a sin. "Or his day shall come to die," denotes natural death, when the time has come for a man to die by reason of his temperament (mixture of humors). "Or he shall go down into battle, and be swept away," denoted accidental death, which comes to a man prematurely and not for any sin, but through the indication of the stars, or by reason of a universal decree or law that every one going into a particular battle shall die. If he had not gone into the battle, he would not have died; if he does go he will die by reason of this general indication, though he is not guilty of having committed any sin. He did not mention voluntary death, because no man prefers death to life. But he made a mistake, for Saul's death was voluntary, as we read: "Therefore Saul took his sword and fell upon it" (1 Samuel 31:4). Moses too did not mention voluntary death, for he did not prefer death to life. Therefore he mentioned these three only.

His plea was then as follows: O Lord, if the death decreed upon me is a punishment for my sin, is my iniquity so great that it can not be forgiven? As Cain said: "Is my iniquity too great to bear?" (Genesis 4:13) which the Rabbis explain as follows (*Sanhedrin* 101b, *Erubin* 15b): Cain said to God, "O Lord, Thou bearest heaven and earth, and canst not bear my sin!" What they mean is this: Cain said to God: If my sin is so great that it can not be forgiven, then my power to sin is greater than God's power to forgive; but this is impossible, for God's power is infinite. This was the doubt he expresses in the words: "Is my iniquity too great to bear?" And Moses expressed precisely the same idea when he said: "Thy greatness . . ." (Deuteronomy 3:24). What he meant to say was: I know that Thy greatness is infinite, and that my iniquity can not be so great that Thy infinite greatness is not sufficient to forgive it. Then he said, "And Thy strong hand . . ." meaning to say: If my death is due to the stars, Thou hast shown me miracles and wonders which prove that Thy hand is strong enough to overcome the stars. Then he said: "For what god is there . . ." referring to natural death, such as the righteous die of. Thus the Rabbis say (*Tanhuma Va-Ethanan*, end): "God counts the years of the righteous. . . ."



The meaning is, God counts their years to see that they should not be shortened either by punishment or by accident, but that they should live as many years as they are capable of living in accordance with their nature, the composition of their humors, and the fundamental vigor which they possess from the time of their creation. This is the reason why the Bible, referring to Sarah, uses the expression: "The years of the life of Sarah," (Genesis 23:1) having just said: "And the life of Sarah was a hundred and seven and twenty years." The Bible desires to indicate that the hundred and twenty-seven years that she lived was the number of years of her life, i.e., the number of years which her nature and fundamental and original vigor determined that she should live. Her days were not shortened as were those of Abraham, who, as the Rabbis say (*Beresheet Rabbah* 63), should have lived a hundred and eighty years, like Isaac, but lived only a hundred and seventy-five, his years having been shortened by five so that he should not see the evil life of Esau. In order to indicate this the expression used in his case is: "And these are the days of the years of Abraham's life *which he lived*" (Genesis 25:7), i.e., these are the years which he actually lived, but not those which, according to the nature of his temperament and his original vigor, he should have lived, as was the case with Sarah.

Accordingly, Moses said: If my death is natural, that is, if there is no power in the composition of my temperament to enable me to live longer, Thou canst renew my youth like an eagle, and give me power to be restored like a green fir tree so as to be strong, for there is no other god in the world beside Thee who can do what Thou doest, namely who can create living things and endow them with new natural strength. If, therefore, Thou shouldst give me new life and make me a new creature, there would be none to say Thee nay, for there is no one in the world who can do what Thou doest, or who has Thy strength. All this being so, and there being none to prevent Thee, "Let me go over, I pray Thee, and see. . . ."

But God replied: "Let it suffice thee. . . . But charge Joshua . . . for he shall go over . . ." (Deuteronomy 3:26-28). To such an extent, continues Moses, was the divine decree fixed against me, that when we reached the valley opposite Beth-peor, we dwelt there and He did not allow me to go further: "So we abode in the valley over against Beth-peor" (v. 29), i.e., we could not go on further, because I was to be buried there, as is written: "And he was buried in the valley in the land of Moab, over against Beth-peor" (ibid. 34:6).

To this statement Moses adds the exhortation: "And now, O Israel, hearken unto the statutes . . . that ye may live, and go in and possess the land . . ." (Deuteronomy 4:1). He says in effect: I took all this trouble in order to enter the land, but was not given the privilege. You are given the privilege to enter the land, therefore be strong in observing the commandment of God that you may be worthy to enter.

You might perhaps say: if my prayer was not heard, it is possible that to-day or to-morrow you may sin and your prayers will not be heard either; my answer is: "Your eyes have seen what the Lord did in Baal-peor. . . . But ye that did cleave unto the Lord. . . . For what great nation is there, that hath God so nigh unto them . . ." (Deuteronomy 4:3-7). The meaning is, do not

think that an individual and a congregation are equal in this matter, for it is not so. With all my worth, my prayer in my own behalf was not accepted, because I am an individual; whereas though you worshipped idols and bowed down to Peor—and there is no one the Lord hates as much as one who worships idols—my prayer in your behalf was accepted. When I prayed for you on the occasion of the golden calf and of Peor, my prayer was accepted, and God forgave you, though my own prayer for myself was not accepted.

It appears also from the language of the Rabbis in *Sifre* (30) that the reason Moses speaks of the sin of Baal-peor in this place is in order to indicate the difference between the prayer of an individual for an individual and his prayers for a congregation. Although the two prayers may be equal and of the same kind, yet the prayer for the congregation is more likely to be heard than the prayer for the individual. Therefore he adds the words: "As the Lord our God is whosoever we call upon Him" (Deuteronomy 4:7), the meaning being that no matter what the content of the prayer is, if it is for the congregation, it is accepted. Hence the Rabbis say (*Berakot* 8a): "God does not reject the prayers of the congregation, as is said: 'Behold, God despiseth not the man' (Job 36:5)". They also say: "A person should always join a congregation" (*Berakot* 30a), thus indicating that the prayer of a congregation is always accepted, while that of an individual is not accepted when it concerns a matter that has been decided under oath, as was the case with the prayer of Moses to be allowed to enter the land of Israel. It was not accepted because the matter had already been decided under oath.

## QUESTIONS ON CHAPTER 21

1. Albo posits that there are three levels of severity and strictness when it comes to God's Providence and the possibility of changing it through prayer. What are they?
2. Does Albo give any indication *why* the prayer of the congregation is always accepted as opposed to the prayer of the community?

## CHAPTER 22

We must, however, explain the reason why the decision concerning Moses was accompanied by an oath, so that his prayer was not accepted. According to the Rabbis the essence of Moses's sin at the waters of Meribah was the expression: "Hear now, ye rebels" (Numbers 20:10), used by Moses, which was an insult to the honor of Israel. And they infer from this that he who insults the honor of a community is guilty of an offense equal to that of profaning the name of God (*Yalkut Shim'oni* 764). But it is very difficult to suppose that such a sin should not be capable of atonement. Besides we find in Deuteronomy that Moses again says to the Israel: "Ye have been rebellious against the Lord" (Deuteronomy 9:7). If Moses had been punished for saying to them: "Hear now, ye rebels," he would scarcely have used a similar expression again.

The explanation of the sin of the waters of Meribah has given the commentators a great deal of difficulty, so much so that Maimonides gave a far fetched explanation, saying (*Shemonah Perakim* 4) that the sin of Moses consisted in becoming angry with Israel for no sufficient reason, when God was not angry with them. For God was not angry with them when they asked for things that were necessities, like water or the manna. According to Maimonides, then, there was here a profanation of the Holy Name, for the people would think that God was angry with them because they asked for water, although they needed it. Else, they would say, Moses would not have been angry with them for no reason. For anger is an unworthy quality, and it is not likely that the head of the prophets would give way to such a low impulse without reason, far be it! Hence the people would come to think ill of God, assuming that He was angry for no good reason. This is the gist of Maimonides' interpretation, but it is far fetched.

Nahmanides refuted this opinion in his commentary on the Torah. It appears, however, from his words that he, too, agrees with Maimonides that the sin did not consist in the fact that they did not speak to the rock; and for the following reasons: either because the rock is not a rational being to receive a command from God, or because, since Moses was told: "Take the rod, and assemble the congregation, thou, and Aaron thy brother, and speak ye unto the rock . . ." (Numbers 20:8), it seems that he was expected to strike the rock, since he was told to take the rod, else why was it necessary to mention the rod? But this is no proof, for in Horeb he was told: "And thy rod, wherewith thou smotest the river . . ." (Exodus 17:5), and yet it was found necessary to state specifically in the sequel: "And thou shalt smite the rock" (V. 6). Here too therefore he should have been told to strike the rock if that was the intention, for the rod does not cause the flow of the water by the force of striking, for it is not a natural property of a rod when it strikes a rock to split it and bring out water by the force of the blow. The phenomenon is a miracle, and the waters come out by decree of God when the rod is near the rock. In the beginning of his prophetic career Moses was told: "And thou shalt take in thy hand this rod, wherewith thou shalt do the signs" (Exodus 4:17). This shows plainly that the rod was endowed with the property of being the instrument in the performance of the signs, according to the decree of God as commanded through Moses. The proof is as follows: In connection with the plague of the hail Moses was told: "Stretch forth thy hand toward heaven, that there may be hail . . ." (Exodus 9:22) and in the sequel it says: "And Moses stretched forth his rod toward heaven; and the Lord sent thunder and hail, and fire ran down unto the earth" (V. 23). Now the hail was not produced by the rod striking the air. But the miracle of the hail was produced in the air by the will of God when the rod in the hand of Moses was in contact with the air. Here too, therefore, the taking of the rod is no proof that it had to be used to strike.

As for the first argument that God would give a command only to a rational being, and the rock was not a rational being to receive a command from God to give forth its waters (this is the opinion of Maimonides, as can be seen in "*Pirke Moshe*," ch. 25), it is not valid, for matter does not become

affected by itself, but is acted upon by a mover which moves it and prepares it to receive the form. Now when God commands the matter to receive a form or undergo a certain change, as in the verse: "Let the earth bring forth the living creature . . ."; "Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures . . ." (Genesis 1:24, 20), and similar passages, the command is not given to the matter, but to the mover that he should prepare the matter to receive the form or to undergo the change which God has decreed. Now the command which is directed to the mover is given to a rational being undoubtedly.

My opinion is that the sin at the waters of Meribah was that they [Moses and Aaron] did not speak to the rock, as the Bible literally says. The text proves it, which says: "Because ye rebelled against My word at the waters of Meribah" (Numbers 20:24). Such an expression cannot apply to the words: "Hear now, ye rebels," nor to Moses's anger, but only to their violation of God's command. The essence of the sin, however, which caused God to take an oath, was that the act evinced a lack of faith, as we read: "Because ye believed not in Me . . . therefore ye shall not bring . . ." (V. 12).

The explanation is as follows: One great principle of the Torah and foundation of faith which is contained in the belief in God's Providence, is that God subjects nature to the control of believers, as Moses says in the psalm following his prayer (psalm 91). In the name of God he assures him who dwells "in the covert of the Most High," and abides "in the shadow of the Almighty," that God will deliver him from the snare of the fowler and from pestilence and from natural accidents, so that he shall tread "upon the lion and the asp," and trample under feet "the young lion and the serpent."

We find this verified in the lives of some of the pious men. For example, we are told about Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa that he set his foot on the hole of a lizard and was bitten; but the lizard died, a reversal in the natural course. Rabbi Hanina then said to his disciples: My children, it is not the lizard that kills, but sin it is that kills (*Berakot* 33a). We thus see that by the command of the righteous changes occur in nature. We are also told concerning R. Hanina that he said: "He who said that oil should burn, will command vinegar to burn," (*Ta'anit* 25a) and it was so, and we find other similar cases. Similarly the Rabbis say concerning Rabbi Phinehas ben Yair (*Hullin* 7a) that by his command he divided a river many times. A river is not a rational being, and yet it was divided for those who fulfil the divine commandments and those who associate with them. We are also told (*Ta'anit* 21a) of a great many miracles that were performed by Nahum of Gamzo and other righteous men by a mere word without prophecy or divine speech or command. Similarly, Eliphaz said to Job: "Thou shalt also decree a thing, and it shall be established unto thee" (Job 22:28). From this it appears that the prophets and those who speak with the Holy Spirit, like Eliphaz, agree that nature changes by the command of the righteous according to their will, not to speak of the prophets, who performed miracles by their commands. Thus Elijah said: "As the Lord, the God of Israel, liveth . . . there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word" (1 Kings 17:1). He also said: "If I be a man of God, let fire come down from heaven, and consume thee and thy fifty" (2 Kings 1:10), and it

was so. Elisha said: "To-morrow about this time shall a measure of fine flour be sold for a shekel . . .," (2 Kings 7:1) and it was so. Also he "made the iron to swim," (2 Kings 6:6) and performed other miracles without a previous prophetic message or divine commandment concerning the matter. The same is true of the other prophets. Moses himself said: "If these men die the common death of all men. . . . But if the Lord make a new thing. . . . And it came to pass, as he made an end of speaking all these words, that the ground did cleave asunder that was under them. And the earth opened her mouth . . ." (Numbers 16:29-32). But we are not told that God commanded him to do this. Isaiah also says: "That confirmeth the word of His servant, and performeth the counsel of His messengers" (Isaiah 44:26).

He, therefore, who doubts that God performs the will of the prophet or the righteous or the pious man that is worthy, is virtually casting doubt upon the Torah and one of its principles. Particularly on an occasion for the sanctification of the divine name is it incumbent upon one to publish the fact that nature is subject to, and is compelled to do the will of those who observe the Torah and fulfil its commandments. A prophet therefore who is worthy to perform miracles and refuses to do so when he can save thereby a nation or a community, is surely responsible for casting a doubt upon the belief. For the bystander will think that there is no truth in the biblical statements, made in many places, that nature is subject to those who perform the commandments of the Torah, and this will lead to doubting the Torah.

This is especially the case when people see that the very same prophet through whom the Torah was given does not rely upon this belief to make a decree against nature so as to change its course or to perform a miracle, though the prophet in question is more worthy to perform miracles than any one else. This no doubt leads to profanation of the Holy Name and to the casting of doubt upon the faith. It looks as if the prophet himself were in doubt whether it is true that nature can be changed by his word, as the Torah promises. This is why it says: "Because ye believed not in Me." For if, when the Israelites asked for water, Moses and Aaron had decreed that the rock should split and water should flow, God would without doubt have "confirmed the word of His servant and performed the counsel of His messengers," and He would thus have been sanctified in the eyes of all the people.

But Moses and Aaron did not do so, instead they went to the door of the tent of meeting as though they were fleeing from the people, as Ibn Ezra explains, and as though they had no idea what to do. This was no doubt a profanation of the divine name, and was likely to cause lack of faith in God and His Torah on the part of those who witnessed the affair. Therefore the Bible says: "Ye believed not in Me." For if you had believed you would have decreed a change in the course of nature, in order that My name might be sanctified through you, when all people would see that I "confirm the words of My servant and perform the counsel of My messengers."

And though Moses and Aaron acted as they did by reason of their great humility, not wishing to take any credit unto themselves without the

command of God, nevertheless it was accounted to them as an iniquity and a lack of faith because of the profanation of the divine name which resulted from it, as we have explained. Hence we find that when Joshua was in a similar predicament, he did not wait for divine permission or advice, but relied on God that He would do his will, and said: "Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon . . ." (Joshua 10:12) As the Bible testifies: "Then spoke Joshua to the Lord . . . ; and he said in the sight of Israel: 'Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon. . . .'" God confirmed his word, and the Bible even says that such a great thing did not happen even in the days of Moses, namely that Moses should of his own accord have given so great a command and it should be fulfilled. The Bible says: "And there was no day like that before it or after it, that the Lord harkened unto the voice of a man" (V. 14), i.e., that God should confirm such an important command given by a man of his own accord. This is an allusion to the lack of faith which the Bible imputes to Moses and Aaron because they refused to act of their own accord without divine authority. Then again when they were told: "And ye shall speak unto the rock," and they did not speak, but struck it instead, they sinned again in that they transgressed the command of God. For if they had spoken, the name of God would have been sanctified and they would have made good part of their error. But not having spoken, they added to their sin.

The reason they committed the sin was that they thought that as in Horeb the waters came out by striking, they would in this case too come out only by striking. But God had intended otherwise. At the first time the Torah had not yet been given and nature was not as yet subject to Israel to such an extent. But now in the fortieth year they were worthy of having miracles done for them and of having nature submit to them by the mere word of Moses. Therefore there was rebellion in the fact that they did not speak to the rock as they had been commanded, and lack of faith and profanation of the Holy Name in that they did not, on their own responsibility and without divine command, decree that the rock should give forth its water. Similarly we find when God said to Moses: "Get thee up into this mountain of Abarim . . . and be gathered unto thy people" (Deuteronomy 32:49-50), that the Bible mentions two things: "Because ye trespassed against Me . . ." and "Because ye sanctified Me not" (V. 51), alluding thereby to the two sins.

Now since the sin involved lack of faith and profanation of the Holy Name, it was not subject to forgiveness, as we find in the treatise *Yoma*: "But if one is guilty of profanation of the Holy Name, repentance has no power to suspend punishment, nor can suffering wipe out the guilt, death alone erases the stain" (*Yoma* 86a). Therefore God made a decree with an oath, and for this reason neither Moses's prayer nor his repentance availed him in this sin. Study this chapter very carefully that you may understand it, for it contains the best that has been said on this subject, and may God in his mercy deliver us from error, amen.

## QUESTIONS ON CHAPTER 22

1. What weaknesses did Albo find in previous explanations of Moses's sin? How did he avoid them in his own theory?
2. What biblical verse is the strongest proof of Albo's theory?
3. What fundamental assumption did Albo need to make in order for his theory to work, even though it has no explicit basis in the biblical text?
4. According to Albo, does God's rejection of Moses's prayer have any relevance to the prayer-life of average Jews? Why or why not?

## CHAPTER 23

Some words denote good solely and absolutely, and do not denote evil at all. Some denote evil absolutely, and in no way denote good, while there are certain words that denote for the most part good, but in some aspect denote also evil, and vice versa.

Those which denote good only, like "upright," "faithful," "merciful," "gracious," and so on, may be applied to God and used in praying to Him. Those which denote absolute evil, like "wicked," "wrong doer," "robber," "doer of violence," and so on, may not be ascribed to God, much less be used in prayer. Those words which denote good for the most part may not be applied to God unless the prophets apply them to Him, like the word *Hasid* (pious, merciful), for example. For though it denotes good for the most part, nevertheless since we also find it used sometimes, though rarely, to signify shame, as: "Lest he that heareth it *revile* (*yehasedeka*) thee" (Proverbs 25:10); "It is a *shameful* (*hesed*) thing," (Leviticus 20:17) we should not permit ourselves to apply it to God if we did not find in the Bible the expression: "For I am merciful (*Hasid*), saith the Lord, I will not bear grudge forever" (Jeremiah 3:12).

But those words which denote for the most part something evil or shameful, we must not permit ourselves to apply to God in our prayer even though we find that the prophets apply them to Him, unless they apply them in prayer. For example, grief and sorrow are ascribed to God in the Bible: "And it grieved Him at His heart" (Genesis 6:6); "And His soul was grieved for the misery of Israel" (Judges 10:16). And yet we do not apply such phrases to God in prayer, as, "Grieve for me," or "May Thy soul grieve for me." Similarly we do not permit ourselves to ascribe to God weeping, although the prophets do ascribe it to Him, according to the opinion of our Rabbis (*Hagigah* 5b): "Said Rab Samuel son of Unya in the name of Rab: There is a place where God weeps, and its name is *Mistarim*, as is said: 'But if ye will not hear it, My soul shall weep in *Mistarim* for your pride' (Jeremiah 13:17). 'For your pride,' means the pride of Israel, which has been humbled. Is there weeping in the presence of God? Do we not read: 'Strength and gladness are in His place?' (1 Chronicles 16:27). Answer: The two are not incompatible, the one has reference to the inner chambers, the other to the outer."

The Rabbis, as we see, take the verse to represent the words of God and not those of the prophet, because the section begins: "Hear ye, and give ear, be not proud; for the Lord hath spoken" (Jeremiah 13:15). This language shows that they are the words of God and not those of the prophet, as we read: "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord hath spoken: Children I have reared, and brought up . . ." (Isaiah 1:1). The passage reads: "Give glory to the Lord your God, before it grow dark. . . . But if ye will not hear it, My soul shall weep in *Mistarim* for your pride." According to the Rabbis, the meaning is as follows: The words: "Hear ye, and give ear, be not proud (*tigbahu*)," mean: Do not think you are eternal like those on high (*gebohim*), for it is not so. You belong to that part of nature which is subject to genesis and decay, and if you desire permanence, "Give glory to the Lord your God," i.e., give your soul, which is called glory, as in the verse: "Yea, let him lay my glory in the dust" (Psalms 7:6). Give it to God, and see to it that it should obtain spiritual perfection, which is also called glory, as in the verses: "And his resting-place shall be glorious" (Isaiah 11:10); "Let the saints exult in glory" (Psalms 149:5). This perfection is called glory, because it shows God's glory in that He created the human soul in such a way that though man belongs to that part of nature which is subject to genesis and decay, if the soul cleaves to Him, it can become permanent and eternal.

The prophet then says that they should endeavor to attain this perfection before the day of death, "before it grow dark," as Solomon says: "Remember then thy Creator in the days of thy youth. . . . Before the sun, and the moon, and the stars, are darkened" (Ecclesiastes 12:12), which refers to the day of death. Then the prophet continues: "But if ye will not hear it, My soul shall weep in *Mistarim*," i.e., if you will not hearken to My counsel to endeavor to attain this glory, namely the perfection of the soul, My soul will weep in *Mistarim*. The meaning of which is: Be assured that My wisdom and My will have decreed that you should be destined for evil and destruction. (Weeping, as is well known, is always done for something that has ceased to be.) He thus alludes to the fact that there is a place to which privation and evil attach, namely the sublunar world, which the Rabbis call the inner chambers, because the earth is in the center of the world, surrounded on all sides, while the heavens are called the outer chambers where gladness, i.e., permanence, reigns; or it may be that because privation attaches to "hyle" (matter), which can not be perceived by the senses, he calls it inner chambers, while the designation outer chambers applies to sensible existence. In this way they mean to indicate that the whole of existence is cared for and guided by God, even that portion to which privation attaches, which is called inner chambers. The existence of this part is due to the gladness which exists in that sensible nature which is called outer chambers. This is an allusion to the fact that since privation in existing things is due to matter (hyle), none of them can be eternal except through the soul. The words: "My soul shall weep," signify: The human soul, which is Mine, will be destroyed, for "weeping" alludes to destruction. Or the words may be used figuratively, as though the Maker is grieved when His work does not realize the final perfection which He intended.



Therefore the prophet says that the weeping is for the pride of Israel which is humbled. The virtue of Israel and their perfection which is intended for them through the Torah, is the perfection and permanent existence of the soul. Therefore God is grieved if the soul does not maintain its permanence and ceases to be. This is the meaning of the expression that He weeps or that there is weeping before Him.

Now, as to this and similar expressions, though we find that, according to the Rabbis, the prophet applies them to God, we must not permit ourselves to apply them to God in our prayer and say: "Weep for me," or "Grieve for me," or, "Let Thy soul grieve for me." We may, however, say: "May Thy mercies yearn for us," because we find that the prophet also uses this expression in a prayer. Isaiah says: "The yearning of Thy heart and Thy compassions, now restrained toward me" (Isaiah 63:15).

It is thus clear that not every one is free to express himself as he pleases in prayer, and especially is he not free to ascribe an attribute to God for which there is no authority. This is what Ecclesiastes had in mind when he said: "Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thy heart be hasty to utter a word before God" (Ecclesiastes 5:1). Abraham Ibn Ezra goes into this matter at length in his commentary on Ecclesiastes on this verse. His ideas are right and need no corrections. To sum up, a prayer must satisfy three requirements in order to be acceptable:

1. It must be brief and have appropriate expressions indicating the suppliant's ideas. One must not be verbose, for verbosity is the quality of a fool, hence one must not bring oneself under the verse: "For a dream cometh through a multitude of business; and a fool's voice through a multitude of words" (ibid., v. 2). The words of the prayer must be pleasant to the hearer and not tiresome. For this reason, songs and *piyyutim* and supplications in verse have been chosen for the prayers because all the requirements mentioned are contained in them, and they correspond to musical rhythm besides, for the definition of a poem is that it is a composition in which the parts bear relation to and have connection with each other, and it expresses the idea of the composer in brief and pleasant words, metrically arranged in accordance with musical rhythm.
2. The intention of the mind must be in agreement with the words one expresses. The suppliant must not put himself under the designation: "But they beguiled Him with their mouth, and lied unto Him with their tongue. For their heart was not steadfast with Him" (Psalms 78:36-37). He must be of those whose speech agrees with their thoughts, as David said: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable before Thee" (Psalms 19:15). The meaning is, since the words of my mouth are in agreement with the meditation of my heart, let them be acceptable before Thee.
3. The voice must be low and indicative of submission, as of a person who beseeches his master, as the Psalmist says: "Hear my voice, O God, in my complaint" (Psalms 64:2); "Hear the voice of my supplications, when I cry unto Thee" (Psalms 28:2). One must not lay

oneself open to the charge: "She hath uttered her voice against Me; therefore have I hated her" (Jeremiah 12:8).

These three requirements are alluded to by David in the fifth psalm. "Give ear to my words," (Psalms 5:2) alludes to the first requirement, which is that of brevity. "Consider my meditation," alludes to the second requirement, sincerity; "Hearken unto the voice of my cry," alludes to the third requirement, submissiveness as indicated in the voice. These are the indispensable conditions, without which prayer can not be accepted. But even though the three requirements are present, it does not follow that the prayer is bound, under all circumstances, to be accepted. It may be that the suppliant is so far from God that he must pray repeatedly and intensely before he can be heard, but after he has prayed repeatedly and devoutly he may be heard. This is why Isaiah finds fault with Israel because they did not importune God with prayer: "And there is none that calleth upon Thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of Thee" (Isaiah 64:6). From this it seems that if they had persisted in praying to God, they would have been heard. Similarly we find in relation to the men of Nineveh: "Let them cry mightily unto God," (Jonah 3:8) and they were heard. Moses, also, when he prayed concerning the matter of the calf, continued and persisted in his prayer many days until he was answered. The same is true of his prayer at the time of the spies, until he was told: "I have pardoned according to thy word" (Numbers 14:20).

And sometimes the suppliant is so far from God, or the thing that is requested is so great that prayer alone, though continuous and earnest, is not enough, and there is need of some act or acts indicating submission and repentance. Isaiah says: "Yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear," and later he says: "Wash you, make you clean . . ." (Isaiah 1:15-16). In relation to the men of Nineveh it says: "Let them be covered with sackcloth, both man and beast" (Jonah 3:8). The righteous men, too, performed acts indicative of submission. Daniel said: "I ate no pleasant bread, neither came flesh nor wine in my mouth, neither did I anoint myself at all" (Daniel 10:3). And the angel said to him: "From the first day that thou didst set thy heart to understand, and to humble thyself before thy God, thy words were heard" (Daniel 10:12).

There are certain persons for whom it is sufficient to pray in thought alone. David says: "The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart" (Psalms 34:18); "The Lord is nigh unto all them that call upon Him" (Psalms 145:18). There are still others of so high a degree that they are granted even what they do not ask for. This is the position of the "God-fearing": "He will fulfil the desire of them that fear Him" (v. 19). Nevertheless they are obliged to pray actually, as the verse continues: "He also will hear their cry, and will save them" (ibid.). Finally there are those who occupy the highest degree, the "lovers of God." They do not need to pray to God, who keeps them of His own accord, as the sequel has it: "The Lord preserveth all them that love Him" (V. 20). The Rabbis say, in commenting upon the verse: "Who alone doeth wondrous things" (Psalms 72:18): The one for whom the

miracle is done does not realize that a miracle has been done for him (*Niddah* 31a). This was the position of Abraham.

### QUESTIONS ON CHAPTER 23

1. Are Albo's rules for which words to use a guide to those who compose their own prayers, or a description of how the rabbinic prayers were composed? How do you know?
2. Which *piyyutim* (liturgical poems) that you are familiar with fit Albo's guidelines? Which ones break his rules?
3. Does prayer have an intrinsic value for *every* person according to Albo?

### CHAPTER 24

All the acts which a man does do not necessarily realize the purpose intended in doing them. It happens that a person does all that is necessary in the proper way and yet fails to realize the purpose intended. Thus the physician in many cases does all that is necessary and in the best way in which it can be done, without any error on his or the patient's part, and yet the cure, which is intended, does not come about. Similarly, the farmer may do all that is proper, he may sow at the proper time and his field may be good and kept in good shape, and yet the seed may not prosper. The explanation of all this is clear. Neither the physician alone nor the physician plus the patient are the cause of the cure, but the physician and nature. Similarly in agriculture, the cause of the produce is not the husbandman alone, nor the field, but the husbandman and nature.

So in the case of prayer. It often happens that a person prays in a proper way, at the proper time, and yet his prayer is not accepted, not because of any sin on his part, but because the will of God does not assent. In the same way a shipbuilder, in many cases, makes his ship properly, navigates it properly on the sea at the proper time, and yet fails to reach his desired destination, simply because the will of God does not desire it, either as a punishment, like the case of Jonah, or by way of providence, for a good end, as determined in the several ways discussed above.<sup>12</sup> So prayer sometimes fails of acceptance, either as a punishment, as we explained in the case of Moses, or because the recipient [of God's influence] is not prepared until he persists in offering many prayers, or performs certain acts indicative of submission, such as fasting or putting on sackcloth, like the men of Nineveh, and so on, as we explained; or there may be some other obstacle, as the Rabbis say, that David's prayer that he should not die on the Sabbath, was not accepted, because the time had come for Solomon his son to reign, and one reign can not encroach upon another even a hair's breadth (*Shabbat*

12. Part four, chapter 13.

30a). Or because God knows that the favor requested is not good for the suppliant, and hence his prayer is not accepted by way of providence, for his own good. For example, a person may pray for children, and his prayer is not accepted because God knows that his children will be hostile to him and will seek to kill him, as Absalom sought to kill David; or a person may pray for wealth, and God knows that his wealth will be the cause of his death, as Solomon says: "Riches kept by the owner thereof to his hurt" (Ecclesiastes 5:12); or the cause of unbelief, as Solomon says: "Lest I be full and deny, and say: 'Who is the Lord?'" (Proverbs 30:9) or for some other cause hidden from us and known to God.

The best kind of prayer is therefore that of the wise man,<sup>13</sup> who said: "O Lord, do Thy will in heaven above, show kindness to those who fear Thee here below, and do what is good in Thine eyes" (*Berakot* 29b). He meant that God should do His will in heaven, so that pleasure may be afforded below to those who fear the Lord, i.e., that He should overcome the stars and annul their decree against those who perform His will, so that they may have power to save themselves from their trouble. Then he says: "And do what is good in Thine eyes," that is, whatever it is that I pray to Thee for, attend not to my words or request, to do what my heart desires, or what I ask, for many times I ask and pray for something which is bad for me, thinking it is a good. But Thou knowest better than I whether the thing is good for me or bad. Therefore decide Thou and not I; do what Thou knowest is good. Therefore he says: "Good in *Thine* eyes," and not in my eyes. This is the meaning of the rabbinical statement: "One is obliged to bless God for evil, as well as for good" (*Berakot* 20a). The reason is because God knows what is good, not man, and it is God who has to choose the way of good and of salvation for man, but man has nothing to do but to bless God always. This is what David meant when he said: "Salvation belongeth unto the Lord" (Psalms 3:9); i.e., God alone knows how to choose the way of salvation, not man. Upon man it is incumbent always to bless the Lord for good as well as for evil, and to recognize that everything is for his good. Hence the psalmist concludes: "Thy blessing be upon Thy people, Selah."

For this reason the most fitting prayer is to ask the divine favor in general terms, and not in terms definite and specific. A person who prays to God in particular and specific terms is, as it were, desirous of forcing the divine will to his own ideas and preferences instead of bending his ideas to God's will; but this is tantamount to a contempt for God's knowledge and power, as though God knew no other way of granting his request except the one which he has chosen. Concerning such as he does the Psalmist say: "Only for God wait thou in stillness, my soul; For from Him cometh my hope" (Psalms 62:6); i.e., when thou prayest to a human being, thou must specify thy request and state the way in which thou desirest to attain thy purpose, for without this he would not know what is in thy mind, what thou requirest and what is good and advantageous for thee. But when thou

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13. Rabbi Eliezer, as quoted in the Talmud.

prayest before God, thou must not specify thy request, but, "wait in silence for Him, my soul," and do not thou choose the way for thy salvation, for He knows what is good and beneficial for thee better than thou. This is the meaning of the words: "From Him cometh my salvation," or, "From Him cometh my hope," for He knows the way of salvation or the way to realize the hope better than I. For sometimes I think of a certain way of obtaining honor or some other good or salvation and the result is the opposite. Therefore one must pray to Him in general terms and cast one's burden upon Him (Psalms 55:23). This is the meaning of the Psalmist who, after saying: "So shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord" (Psalms 37:4), adds: "Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in Him, and He will bring it to pass" (v. 5). That is, he will bring to pass what is good and beneficial to thee, for He knows how to choose the way of good or honor or salvation better than thou. Hence the Psalmist also says: "Upon God resteth my salvation and my glory" (Psalms 62:8). That is, the reason I say, "Only for God wait thou in stillness, my soul," is because it is for Him to choose what is salvation for me or relief or deliverance or honor, for I am not able to tell, but I put my trust in Him that He will choose what is good and proper and beneficial for me. Hence he concludes: "The rock of my strength, and my refuge, is in God." This will suffice concerning prayer.

#### QUESTIONS ON CHAPTER 24

1. How does the idea that the world is governed by Divine Providence destroy the idea of asking God for particular things, just as we might ask a human being for them?
2. Do you think limiting prayers to general things has any impact on *kavvana*? If so, how?



## Reading 7. Maharal of Prague on Prayer

*Netiv ha-Avoda / The Path of God's Service*

### INTRODUCTION

Rabbi Yehuda Leow (1525–1609), better known as Maharal of Prague, was one of Judaism's most unique and original thinkers. Though he is most famous because of the widespread legend attributing the creation of a *golem* to him, this has nothing whatsoever to do with the profound ideas he actually wrote about. His thought was not widely studied until the twentieth century, when it began to be popularized by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kuk and his students.

Maharal was a lone thinker, and he cannot be clearly identified with any known school of thought either kabbalistic or philosophic. Though he uses no standard kabbalistic terminology in his writings, some of his ideas hint at kabbalistic concepts. Because of this ambiguity, scholars have long debated whether Maharal's thought should be classified as kabbalistic.

In any case, Maharal's great contribution to Jewish thought was neither philosophic nor kabbalistic in the classical sense. Instead, he devoted a lifetime of thinking and writing to reinterpreting rabbinic lore, or *aggada*, according to an entirely new symbolic system. The idea that *aggada* needs to be interpreted—that the true meaning of *midrashim* is in the deeper ideas that they only hint at instead of spelling out directly—had long been realized. It was stated most forcefully by Rambam, who wrote that there are three basic approaches to *aggada* and *midrash*: (1) Pious but ignorant people take them literally; (2) Sceptics and heretics reject them as foolish-

ness; and (3) True scholars know that their true meaning can only be known through careful interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

Rambam himself interpreted rabbinic lore in such a way as to find the basic ideas of Aristotelian philosophy in it. But Maharal did nothing of the sort. Unlike Rambam, who interpreted selected passages as they became relevant to his presentation of his philosophy, Maharal had pursued a more ambitious goal for *aggada*: He attempted to interpret the entire wealth of rabbinic lore as far as he could (and as anyone who is familiar with *midrash* and *aggada* knows, this is an enormous task). And his system of interpretation—which he consistently applied to the entire realm of rabbinic lore—was *symbolic*, rather than philosophic (or kabbalistic). He would take some spiritual theme and show how it was reflected in a rabbinic story or in the various sides of a rabbinic debate. This usually meant saying that the particulars of a rabbinic passage symbolized of something far beyond their meaning in context.

Maharal wrote numerous lengthy works, all of them in Hebrew. *Netivot Olam* ("Paths to Eternity") is a collection of essays, some of them as long as short books, on various positive themes of Jewish life. Each separate essay is called a *nativ* (path). The first three *netivot* (on Torah, prayer, and kindness) were chosen according to the well-known Mishna which says: "The world stands on three pillars—Torah study, service of God (*avoda*), and acts of kindness" (*Avot* 1:2). The rest of the themes are human character traits and important aspects of Jewish religious life. Thus, *Netiv ha-Avoda*, which we have translated below, is the second part of a much larger work.

*Avoda* means "service," i.e., the service of God. In the Bible, *avoda* almost exclusively refers to the sacrifices in the Tabernacle or in the holy Temple. But as we learned, it can also mean prayer. (Because *avoda* is such an important term for this reading, we will use it in Hebrew throughout.) In the first chapter of *Netiv ha-Avoda*, Maharal explains the idea of sacrifice through his unique method of explaining biblical verses and rabbinic *aggadot* according to a unique symbolic scheme. In chapter two he does the same for the idea of petitionary prayer. But at the beginning of chapter three he explains that since sacrifice is no longer a practical reality, and the type of *avoda* remaining for Jews today is prayer, the rest of *Netiv ha-Avoda* will be devoted to prayer. However, despite the detailed symbolic explanation of numerous prayers in the rest of the treatise, everything Maharal writes about prayer fits into the same overall scheme that he created to explain the idea of sacrifice. Both prayer and sacrifice are essentially the same according to Maharal, because both are *avoda*.

Below is a full translation of *Netiv ha-Avoda*'s first three chapters. These chapters spell out Maharal's overall philosophy on sacrifice and prayer. In the next three chapters (4–6) Maharal discussed various rabbinic passages about where and how one should pray. At the end of chapter six, Maharal began to interpret the most important prayers according to their rabbinic

1. See the Introduction to *Perek Helek* (*Sanhedrin* chapter 10) in Rambam's *Commentary on the Mishna*, vol. 2 in ed. Yosef Kafih (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kuk, 1965), pp. 136–137.

sources, and continued to do so for the rest of the book. Thus, most of *Netiv ha-Avoda* becomes a unique in-depth commentary on the siddur as well as an essay on the philosophy of prayer, and it should be studied for this reason as well. But such an elaborate commentary is beyond the scope of this volume. Therefore, I have translated the three chapters most relevant to Maharal's general philosophy of prayer, but not his explanations of specific prayers.<sup>2</sup>

Most of Maharal's works (including the rest of *Netiv ha-Avoda*) have never been translated into English. And in truth, the only way to really understand Maharal well is to read him in the original; I presume that this is what anyone who wants to study his philosophy in depth will do. Once a few stylistic tendencies have been mastered, his works are not so hard to read. So this translation was not done as an authoritative presentation of Maharal's thought, but rather so that English speakers interested in Jewish prayer could gain a basic appreciation of his views on the topic.

## *Netiv ha-Avoda: Text*

### CHAPTER ONE

"The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright pleases Him" (Proverbs 15:8).<sup>3</sup> King Solomon, may he rest in peace, wanted to say about the *avoda* (service) of God, blessed is He, that He does not desire this service because He derives some benefit from it. Because if He did benefit from the service, it would make no difference to Him from whom the benefit came, whether from one who is good or wicked.

But this is not true for God, because "the sacrifice of the wicked" is "an abomination." And therefore the *avoda* is not done because it is for the benefit of God, but for the benefit of man alone. And since this *avoda* is for the benefit of man, therefore "the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination," because God does not want the sinner to benefit, "but the prayer of the upright pleases Him" because prayer is also the *avoda* of God and His desire.

And perhaps you will ask: If it is true that the *avoda* is not for God's benefit, then why did He command this service of bringing a sacrifice to God? This is no real question, because even though the *avoda* is not for God's benefit, in any case through it a man hands himself over to God. And even if he doesn't actually hand over his life to Him, just his property that

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2. After chapter three, however, I added an extra selection from *Netiv ha-Avoda* on Maharal's view of public prayer.

3. The biblical quotation in at least one edition of *Netivot Olam* is mistakenly influenced by the similar verse in Proverbs 21:27.



he brings as a sacrifice, in any case this too is considered "giving himself up to God" when he sacrifices his property to Him.

This is called *avoda* because a slave is the possession of his master, and he and his property—all of it belongs to his master. And therefore, when one brings a sacrifice to God, he shows that he is His, just like the slave is the possession of his master. This is why it is called the *avoda* of God when he brings a sacrifice to God.

And there is no greater *avoda* than this. It is truly called *avoda* when a one serves Him and does what he must for Him, because this shows that he is His slave and possession. All the more so when he gives his very self over to God, which in itself shows that he is His slave and possession, and is therefore called *avoda*.

This also shows that God is One, and there is no other beside Him. Because when we bring Him a sacrifice it shows that everything is His. And when everything is His, then there is nothing besides Him and He is One. If not for this it would be possible to say that there is something besides Him, but the sacrifice that we bring to Him shows that He is everything and there is nothing besides Him, and through this we see that God is One.

This is why in conjunction with all of the sacrifices the Torah only uses the unique name of God.<sup>4</sup> This is because through the *avoda* it is shown that He is one and there is no other besides Him, as we have explained.

And this also shows that He is perfectly complete and removed from any deficiency. Because if there was something besides Him (Perish the thought!), then He would be lacking that which is beside Him and thus He would be deficient. But when we serve Him we show that everything is His, and when everything is His there is no deficiency, because He is everything and lacks nothing.

This is why the sacrifices are called "My offering, my bread, as my offerings by fire of pleasing odor to Me" (Numbers 28:1). Because when a man has no bread he is lacking. The bread completes him so that he is no longer lacking. Therefore, the sacrifices are called "My offering, my food, as my offerings by fire" according to the idea that the sacrifice symbolizes His completeness, that He lacks nothing.

God chose only Israel for this *avoda*, and this is according to our explanation that the sacrifices show that God is One and there is nothing besides Him. Therefore it is fitting that the ones sacrificing to Him be the nation which is also One, because those who are not One are not suitable to sacrifice to Him. Just the opposite: Those who are not One cannot show His Oneness.

In the Midrash (*Tanhuma Parashat Tzav*) it says:

The verse states: "For who in the skies can equal the Lord, [can compare with the Lord] among the Divine beings" (Psalms 89:7). The

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4. The four-letter name pronounced "Adonai."

evil Balaam was the defender of the nations of the world, saying: "Would the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with myriads of streams of oil?" (Micah 6:7). What do you [Israel] bring Him? Isn't it one *log* of oil? If He wants I will bring Him "myriads of streams of oil"! What did Abraham sacrifice to Him? Wasn't it one ram, as it says "And he saw a ram . . ." (Genesis 22:13)? If He wants we'll bring Him thousands of rams! And what [else] did Abraham bring Him? His son? I'll bring Him my son and my daughter! As it says: "Shall I give my first-born for my transgression" (ibid.)—this is his first-born son; "the fruit of my body for my sins?" (ibid.)—this is his daughter.

See how shrewd the evil Balaam was! He began by saying, "I have set up *the seven altars*" (Numbers 23:4) and not simply "altars." He meant: "From the time that man was created until now they built seven altars, and I will sacrifice on seven, equal to all of them!" What can this evil man be compared to? To a butcher selling meat in the market, whose store was full of meat. He saw the market commissioner looking at the meat and said to him: "Sir! I have already sent provisions to your house!"

Balaam was the same way. The Holy One, blessed is He, said to Him: "Wicked man! What are you doing?" He replied, "I have set up the seven altars and offered up a bull and a ram on each altar." The Holy One, blessed is He, then said, "If I wanted a sacrifice I would have told Michael and Gabriel, and they would have brought it to me! As it says: "For who in the skies can equal the Lord. . . ." And the verse continues "the Divine beings" [*bivnei elim*, literally "the children of the strong"] which means the children of Abraham and Isaac, who were the strength of the world. I only accept sacrifices from Israel, as it says "Command Aaron and his sons thus . . ." (Leviticus 6:2).

Now, it says that Abraham just brought his only son, while he (Balaam) wanted to bring his son and his daughter, which symbolizes plurality, as it says "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). A person has not fulfilled the mitzva of "be fruitful and multiply" until he has a son and a daughter.

All of this was according to his error, because he thought sacrifices are more fitting according to their quantity. That is why he said that Israel bring God one *log* of oil, but if He wants the nations will bring Him "myriads of rivers of oil." All of this was because Balaam was mistaken about this matter, thinking that sacrificing to Him is a matter of quantity.

The same thing is true of when he said that from the day that man was created until now they built seven altars (because Abraham built four, Isaac one, and Jacob two, so that three Patriarchs together built seven, while he himself built seven altars). It has already been explained that "seven" represents plurality in every context. Whenever scripture wants to indicate plurality it mentions the number seven, as in "Seven times the righteous man falls and gets up" (Proverbs 24:16), or "They will march out against

you [by a single road], flee from you by seven roads"<sup>5</sup> (Deuteronomy 28:7). The reason is explained in another place.

Therefore it says that the patriarchs were the ones who built seven altars *altogether*. There is no actual plurality in the patriarchs, since such a thing would be inappropriate for those who are One. They are connected in that they have within them the potential for plurality, but not in actuality. This is why the patriarchs were three, because three symbolizes "many," as it says: "Days" means two, "many days" means three (*Vayikra Rabba* 19:5 on Leviticus 15:25). And these three (i.e., the Patriarchs) are connected together.

This idea was also explained in another place, when the verse stated (ibid. 32:9), "For the Lord's portion is His people, Jacob is His own allotment" (and this verse has also been explained elsewhere). They said in the midrash (*Sifrei Haazinu* 312; *Bereshit Rabba* 68:12): "Just like the rope [*hevel*] is from triple cords, Jacob is the third of the patriarchs." This means that Jacob is the third one who joins and binds the patriarchs into one unit, just like the rope which is of three cords and is joined together as a rope. Thus, the patriarchs are a plurality which is connected together. They have plurality in potential but not in actuality.

Therefore, the three patriarchs who have connectedness and unity built seven altars together, which shows connectedness and unity, but not actual plurality. So their *avoda* is fitting for God, because He is actually One but with the power for plurality.

And since sacrifice shows God's unity, this is why God told Balaam that if He wanted quantity, as Balaam had thought, then Michael and Gabriel would sacrifice before Him Above, since they are His servants in heaven. But angels are not fit for this, because the angels too have plurality, as scripture says: "Thousands upon thousands served Him" (Daniel 7:10) and "He came from the myriads of the holy" (Deuteronomy 33:2). Therefore, had God wanted many sacrifices, He would have told Michael and Gabriel. And it mentioned these two particular angels because they are opposites: One is appointed over fire, and the other over water, and thus they are especially well-suited to plurality.

But God only chose Israel, who are one nation, for *avoda*. And we have already explained the reason: Because this *avoda* shows His Oneness. And since sacrifice shows that He is one and there is nothing else besides Him, only Israel can relate to the matter, because they are One people. This is the true aspect of service to God. This idea is very distinguished by its deep wisdom. And this midrash was further explained elsewhere, because this is not the place to elaborate on it.

When the verse says, "The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination . . . but the prayer of the upright pleases Him" it means that the sacrifice of evildoers is considered an offense by God because the evil man is the one who leaves uprightness; for that is the meaning of an evil man: one who leaves

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5. I.e., the routed enemy flees by many different roads.

uprightness. And one who leaves uprightness is not One, because uprightness is One. Just as many lines may be drawn from one point, the directions away from uprightness are infinite. But the line that follows the path of uprightness is but One. Therefore it is not fitting that an evil man be called "One," because sometimes he follows an incorrect path for one way and sometimes another way, and therefore the evildoers are separated and not One. This idea will be explained in *Netiv ha-Tzedek* (*The Path of Righteousness*), for they (Hazal) said that the evildoers follow many paths but the upright follow only one path, as it will be explained regarding the verse "The name of the upright man is invoked in blessing, but the fame of evildoers rots" (Proverbs 10:7) where it says "upright man" in the singular but for "evildoers" it uses the plural. For the evildoers follow many paths, while the upright men are on one path, as will be explained; see there.

It thus says "the sacrifice of evildoers is offensive" to reveal that it is not fitting for him (the evildoer) to bring a sacrifice to God when the sacrifice is meant to show His Oneness, but there is no Oneness among evildoers as we said. "But the prayer of the upright is His desire" because prayer, which is the service of God as will soon be explained, is His desire. Because just as for the evildoer who turns away from uprightness, which is One, "the sacrifice of evildoers is offensive," the opposite of this is the prayer of an upright man. For uprightness is One, because the direction following uprightness is One and no more, but the crooked directions are uncountable. Thus, "the prayer of the upright is His desire."

And when it says "the prayer of the upright is His desire" it also alludes to Israel. Israel is called *Yeshurun* because of their uprightness [*yosher*]; they are One, as has been explained, because that which is *yashar* is One. Therefore their prayer is God's desire, as it says: "For what great nation is there that has a God so close at hand as is the Lord our God whenever we call upon Him?" (Deuteronomy 4:7). And this is why He told Balaam that he only chooses the *avoda* of Israel. "The sacrifice of evildoers is offensive" was said about idolaters, whose sacrifice God spurned; They are called "evildoers," the opposite of Israel of whom it was said "And all your people, all of them righteous . . ." (Isaiah 60:21).

And the reason it mentions "sacrifice" regarding evildoers but "prayer" regarding the upright is to teach us that "the sacrifice of evildoers is offensive" even if he does not ask for anything, and just brings a sacrifice to God without any petition, nevertheless it is still offensive to God. But the prayer of the upright is God's desire, even though what he requests from God by his prayer is for his own benefit, as is every prayer. Nevertheless, this *avoda* of the upright man, which is prayer, is God's will, as will soon be explained.

Do not ask how prayer can be *avoda* for God when it is "service to receive a reward," (cf. *Avot* 1:3) and if so how can it be called *avoda*? Because we already said that the whole idea of *avoda* is to show that everything is the possession of God, and is His. This is what the *avoda* of the sacrifices symbolizes, as was explained. Similarly, the prayer one says before Him is like the plea a slave makes to his master for the needs that he requests. By this it is shown that man needs Him, and since man is dependent on God

he belongs to Him. Because whoever is dependent on someone belongs to him, as will be further explained. And thus, prayer is an absolute service [of God] showing that man is dependent on Him and therefore belongs to Him.

And because of this it also says "Before they pray, I will hear" (Isaiah 65:25). How is it possible to say that He hears before they have called? But the meaning of "I will hear" is that "I want to hear," i.e., I want to hear their prayers. All of this is hinted at in the verse "the prayer of the upright is His desire," namely that God desires the *avoda* since the *avoda* shows that He is One and everything is His. This shows His completeness, and therefore He desires the prayers of the righteous just as one who desires his completion. Therefore they said that the world is supported by the *avoda* (*Avot* 1:a), because without the *avoda* man would stand by himself, but nothing has existence in and of itself, but only through God. And because of the fact that Israel serve God, through this they belong to God. Through this they have existence, but not for any other reason.

And since we correctly and clearly explained the matter of the three pillars<sup>6</sup> in the chapter "*Moshe kibbel*" (*Avot* chap. 1), you should also know that these three pillars correspond to three of aspects of man: the intellect, the life-force, and the body. All of them exist only through God.

The life-force gains its existence when he sacrifices his life to God by serving Him. As it says regarding the *avoda*, "When a person presents an offering [of meal] . . ." (Leviticus 2:1) about which our rabbis of blessed memory said, "Who normally makes a meal-offering? A poor man, and it is considered as if he offered his life" (*Yalkut Vayikra* 447). A meal-offering, which is just a one-tenth measure of flour, is considered as if he offered his life, all the more so one who brings a greater sacrifice is certainly considered to have offered his life. Therefore, the aspect of one's life force exists through the *avoda*.

The aspect of one's intelligence exists through the Torah, for through the Torah one clings to God as was explained earlier in *Netiv ha-Torah* (*The Path of the Torah*). Through this, the person's aspect of intelligence exists.

The aspect of one's body exists through acts of kindness, because a person's body only has closeness and attachment to God through the fact that God bestows kindness on all, and through this it exists. And when a man does acts of kindness, God bestows kindness on him as well, as we have explained [this idea] in its context. Therefore it is written, "Your steadfast love is confirmed forever" (Psalms 89:3).

Thus, these three things let the world exist. And since in the previous Path we explained what relates to the Torah as a pillar of the world, it is fitting afterwards to explain what is important about *avoda*. But because our holy and glorious Temple was obliterated and the *avoda* was removed, and because of our sins we have no sacrifice and no meal-offering but only the *avoda* of the heart [i.e., prayer], it is right to explain this *avoda* according to

6. Which are Torah, *avoda*, and acts of kindness, and which Maharal explained in his commentary on *Avot*.

what is found in the gemara that our sages taught about it, and about how great the level of this *avoda* is and the various things deriving from it.

## QUESTIONS FOR NETIV HA-AVODA, CHAPTER ONE

1. What is the one basic question that this chapter is devoted to answering?
2. How does the special value of *avoda* differ from Torah study and acts of kindness?
3. Maharal doesn't elaborate on the idea that the nation of Israel is "One." What do you think he means?

## CHAPTER TWO

In the book of Proverbs it says: "He who turns a deaf ear to Torah—his prayer is an abomination" (28:9). By this, King Solomon of blessed memory meant that two things were given to man by God: the Torah and the *nefesh*.<sup>7</sup> If he turns a deaf ear to Torah, rejecting God's gift to man of the Torah because it doesn't please him, then also his prayer, when a man pours out his *nefesh* to God, is an abomination. Because these two things, namely the Torah and the *nefesh*, depend on each other. Above, in *Netiv ha-Torah*, it was already explained how these two things depend on each other, as they said in the Midrash (*Yalkut Mishlei* on Proverbs 4:4):<sup>8</sup>

David asked the Holy One, Blessed is He, "Guard me like the apple of Your eye" (Psalms 17:8).

The Holy One, Blessed is He, replied, "Keep My commandments and you will live" (Proverbs 4:4, 7:2).

Rabbi Shimon ben Halafta said: What can this be compared to? To a man who lived in the Galilee and owned a vineyard in Judea, and another in Judea who owned a vineyard in the Galilee. The one in the Galilee would go to Judea to his vineyard, and the one in Judea would go to the Galilee. They stood together and said to each other: "Instead of coming to my place, guard mine in your place, and I will guard yours in my place. So said David, "Guard me like the apple of Your eye." The Holy One, blessed in He, replied: "Keep my commandments and live." Rabbi Mani said: Do not let the recitation of *Shema* be insignificant to you, because it has 248 words corresponding to the

7. Maharal uses *nefesh* to mean a number of things: one's physical life-force or being, one's inner "self," one's worldly needs and concerns. We will translate it according to context or simply use *nefesh*.

8. No. 936; this is exactly the same as the version of the midrash quoted by Maharal. But also see *Yalkut Tehillim* 671. I have quoted the midrash in full here, as Maharal did in *Netiv ha-Torah*.

limbs of a person (including the words: Blessed be the name of his Glorious Kingdom forever and ever). The Holy One, Blessed is He, says: If you keep Mine, to recite it properly, then I will guard yours.

This midrash was explained earlier in *Netiv Ha-Torah* (chap. 16). Refer to that discussion. Its meaning is exactly the same as "He who turns a deaf ear to Torah—His prayer is an abomination." When he "turns a deaf ear to the Torah," God in turn will not be pleased when he raises his *nefesh* and draws himself close to God in his prayer. Because if man does not accept the Torah from God, God will not accept a person when he pours out his *nefesh* to Him in his prayer, as we explained above at length.

However, instead of using the term "abomination," it should have simply said "his prayer is not heard." In truth, this term hints at an important matter, namely that when one turns a deaf ear to the Torah, his prayer is disgusting and an absolute abomination to God. As they said in the Talmud, "The prayer of a drunkard is an abomination" (*Eruvin* 64a). The idea of "abomination" is when a person turns to something alien. It is used to describe all of the illicit sexual relationships, which are an attraction towards physical abominations. You see from this that one who is drawn by the physical side too much, becoming a physical body whose intelligence has been removed altogether—this is an abomination to God. This is why the prayer of a drunkard is an abomination, because intelligence has been removed from him and he remains completely physical. When he prays to God to fulfil his needs, he wants God to grant his request to fulfil his physical desire, since he is now a drunkard, a body without a mind. Such a prayer is certainly an abomination to God.

For a person should pray for God to give him what he needs so that he can serve God and study the Torah. Then his prayer is certainly pleasing to the Holy One, blessed is He. But a drunkard who has turned towards the physical so much, when he prays to God to give him what he needs—prayer follows the state of a man at the time when he prays, when he is totally physical and God should give him more so that he can continue to be drawn after the physical. This is certainly an abomination.

This is what "He who turns a deaf ear to Torah—His prayer is an abomination" means: Since he rejects the Torah which is intellectual for prayer which is for his physical existence, his prayer is therefore in the service of his physical body alone. For if his prayer was that God give him what he needs to live so that he can serve Him and study the Torah, something which is not physical—then why did he turn a deaf ear to Torah? Since he did turn a deaf ear to Torah, his prayer must be for his physical needs alone, and a thing which serves his physical needs alone is an abomination.

Therefore, when a person prays to God for his needs, his intention should not be that He grant him wealth and prestige and all of the things that he needs for his physical pleasure, but that God should grant him what he asks for so that he can serve Him. If he pleads for his life, his sole intention should be for God to grant him life so that he can serve Him through the Torah and the mitzvot.

But if his true purpose is physical enjoyment, it is an abomination to God, as the verse signifies: "He who turns a deaf ear to Torah—His prayer is an abomination."

Furthermore, when a man prays to God for his needs it is not in terms of justice, but that God should grant his plea even if he is undeserving, as will be explained. A person must strengthen himself regarding prayer, as will be explained. Therefore, his prayer should be in the most fitting way for it to be answered; as we said, his prayer should be for God to grant his request so that he can serve Him.

There are those who ask regarding prayer that if a person deserves God to give him the thing he prays for, why doesn't He give it to him even without prayer? And if he is not deserving of it, then even if he does pray and request it, why should it be given to him just because of his prayer? They have also asked why it is necessary to pray with speech. God knows the thoughts of men, and it should be enough with thought alone. They have also asked other similarly foolish questions, such that to a small degree they have been affected by an alien spirit because of their lack of understanding.

But the correct idea is that prayer is to make a person complete by giving him what he lacks. It is then that God hears his prayer and his request, when a person is lacking and requires completion. But man is only considered human in terms of his power of speech, without which he is not human. When a person doesn't pray and petition by speaking, there is no one to receive [what has been asked for], because every receiver asks to receive what it is lacking. Therefore one must ask for what he lacks with speech, and then he will be asking for what he lacks as a human being with a need.

But a person is not ready to be completed by the Cause unless he expresses what he is needful of as a human does, and then he is ready to receive completion from the Cause. Therefore, a person must pray to God, who is the Cause, with speech, because through this a person shows that he is human and is ready to receive completion from the Cause as a lacking human being. This is when he expresses his need verbally, because his speech defines him as human. But when he prays in his thoughts alone he has not expressed his needs as a living, expressive being. Only if he is a completely righteous person, whose nature is intelligence, will God answer him if he calls to God in his thoughts alone.

In the chapter *Ein Omedin* (*Berakhot* 31a) Rabbi Hamnuna said: There are so many important halakhot that can be learned from the verses about Hannah! "Now Hannah was praying in her heart" (1 Samuel 1:13)—from this we learn that one who prays must have *kavvana*. "Only her lips moved"—from this we learn that one who prays must mold the words with his lips. "But her voice could not be heard"—from this we learn that one who prays should not make his voice heard when he prays.

We see that the talmudic scholars only obligated a person to mold the words with his lips, meaning to speak them, for the reason we explained



above. For prayer is for a person in the sense that he is a being with the capability of self-expression. But he must not make his voice heard. In the gemara it explains this by quoting a *baraita*: "One who makes his voice heard when he prays is among those of weak faith. One who raises his voice when he prays is of the false prophets." Rashi of blessed memory explained, "one who makes his voice heard when he prays—because he makes it look as if God doesn't hear his prayer when it is silent." But nonetheless, its true meaning is that in prayer a person has faith in God to fulfil his request, and his faith in God clings to the highest level, which is hidden. The primary aspect of *emuna* (faith) is that when a person who has faith in God and his faith reaches the hidden level. *Aleph*, which is the first letter of *emuna* (faith), shows that it reaches the beginning, and *aleph* is also in the word *pele* which expresses hiddenness, as will be explained. Complete faith is when he clings to God through his faith, reaching the highest level, which is hidden. But one who makes his voice heard when he prays does not reach the highest, hidden level. For when one makes his voice heard, it is audible and revealed. And whatever is revealed cannot cling to the highest level, because the highest is concealed. This idea is known by those with understanding. This is why he is considered one of those with weak faith.

But one who raises his voice when he prays is of the false prophets who cling to the powers of impurity, and who do not achieve the level that is hidden and concealed at all. They are called "alien powers." Therefore, one who raises his voice when he prays, which is even more revealed [than one who "makes his voice heard"], is of the false prophets, because making one's voice heard is even more revealed. This is sufficient for those who understand knowledge.

In the chapter *Tefillat ha-Shakhar* (*Berakhot* 28b) it says: When Rabbi Eliezer was ill, his students came in to visit him. They said to him, "Our Master! Show us the paths of life through which we may merit to live in the World to Come!" He said to them, "Be very careful about the dignity of your friends. Keep your children away from frivolous studies and sit them on the laps of Torah scholars. And when you pray, recognize before whom you stand. For doing this you will deserve life in the World to Come."

We already explained the phrase "be very careful about the dignity of your friends" earlier in *Netiv ha-Torah*, about why the dignity of another is what brings a person life in the World to Come. It is fully explained there. Similarly, the statement "recognize before whom you pray" is also clear now, namely that prayer is clinging to God as we explained above regarding "One who makes his voice heard when he prays is among those of weak faith." Prayer is the straight path by which a person ascends to God, as it says, "but the prayer of the upright pleases Him." These words signify how far a person's prayer reaches—to the Upper Will. Therefore, it is through this that he merits the World to Come.

And when he said, "Keep your children away from frivolous studies [*higayon*]" it means the customary way that people teach their children rhetoric and speech, which is called *higayon* from the term *hegeh*. And in the talmudic dictionary [*Arukh*] under the entry *heh-gimmel* it explains: "The

sense of a biblical verse according to its form." This is nothing but speech, like when we teach children the sense and sound of a verse. Therefore he said, "sit them on the laps of Torah scholars"—to teach them wisdom, and this is what brings one to the life of the World to Come. Because this is one of the things that they mentioned: "Three inherit the World to Come—one who raises his sons to study the Torah, etc.," as we explained earlier.

And since he<sup>9</sup> told them he would show them the paths of life, the path ascending from below to above until it reaches the height of the World to Come—this is what is called "the paths of life." This is why he mentioned these things, which are the paths of life, and he said that if they want to ascend the paths of life they should start below and then go up. "Keep your children from frivolous studies"—this is like the beginning of the path, since he is speaking of one who is small and being taught for the first time. And "be very careful about the dignity of your friends"—this is a greater ascension on the path when it speaks of his friend. "Recognize before whom you pray"—this is the end of the path leading to God who is one's absolute Cause. Therefore he mentioned these three things, through which a person ascends to God.

Know that he should initially have told them to keep their children from frivolous studies, since it comes first, but he began with his friend because his friend is like himself, and it is right to begin with something relating to himself.

You need to know that these three things are a clear and straight path, and it is absolutely the way to the World to Come, ascending to the highest level. This is enough.

## QUESTIONS ON CHAPTER TWO

1. According to Maharal, what is the *only* right reason for a person to *ever* petition God?
2. The idea that man's essential distinction from the beasts lies in his ability to speak is a time-honoured notion. How did Maharal make use of this classic idea to solve the philosophical paradoxes of prayer?
3. Contrast Maharal's opinion on silent prayer with Rabbi Yosef Albo's (see reading 6, chapter 23). What fundamental disagreement is this difference the result of?
4. What do you think Maharal meant when he wrote that "faith" is "hidden"?

## CHAPTER THREE

Israel's service of God during their exile is prayer, which applies everywhere. [As it says] in the first chapter of *Ta'anit* (2a):

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9. Rabbi Eliezer.

It was taught in a *baraita*: “loving the Lord your God and serving him [with all your heart and soul]” (Deuteronomy 11:13)—this means prayer. But might it not mean the sacrifices? The Torah therefore says “with all your hearts.” What service is with the heart? I must conclude that it is prayer.

This teaches that prayer is considered service of God. We explained above why prayer is considered *avoda*, namely that the prayer one prays to God shows that he is dependent upon God and needs Him, and he has no existence without Him. And this is exactly what makes Him God—that all things which exist are needful of Him and depend on Him, such that all is really His. Therefore prayer is considered service of God, but fearing Him is not, because fearing Him does not show that man is dependent on Him. But prayer shows that man is dependent on God, and He is everything. Blessed is He, and blessed is His name above all.

The whole idea of the prayer one prays to God is that since he needs God and is dependent on Him, and has no existence independent of God, therefore he prays to Him for all his needs. And when a person is dependent on Him it is as if he is sacrificed to Him, because anything that depends on another is offered and given over to the other. Therefore, prayer is absolute service of God. This matter will be further explained.

The prayers that they [Hazar] decreed are three, the morning prayer, the afternoon prayer, and the evening prayer. It should be asked why they decreed these three prayers at these times. The plain explanation is that it is fitting for a person to subjugate himself to God by his *avoda*, whether with his body, his life, or his money, as it is written, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5). It has already been explained how these three ideas are referred to in the verse “You shall love . . .”—his body is referred to by the words “with all your heart.”<sup>10</sup> And our rabbis of blessed memory explained, “with your two inclinations, with the good inclination and the evil inclination” (*Berakhot* 54a). It is well-known that the evil inclination is in man’s physical body. “With all your soul—even if He takes away one’s soul, with all your might—even if He takes away your money,” as is found in the chapter *Ha-Ro’eh* (*ibid.*), and has been explained at length.

And regarding the morning prayer, a person finds morning sleep to be exceedingly pleasant—our rabbis of blessed memory even had a specific term for it: “morning sleep.”<sup>11</sup> When a person sleeps in the morning he has a powerful desire to continue sleeping, which is an exceedingly physical act, because there is no one more physical than one who is asleep, when only his body remains but his soul does not function at all. (We explained this regarding “morning sleep”; refer to that discussion.) But a person needs to

10. *Levavekha*, which the rabbis took as implying more than one heart or inclination, as Maharal is about to point out.

11. *Shena shel shaharit*.

be resilient and rise from his sleep to pray, and by this he subjugates his body to God by overpowering it.

The afternoon prayer is in the main part of the day, when a man tends to his most important business. [But] he turns from his business to prayer, subjugating his money to God through this.

At night, when a person is tired from his business and the other exertions of his day, and his life-force (*nefesh*) wants to rest—this is a matter for the life-force, because the life-force works and moves as has been explained many times. At night she wants rest and relaxation because her strength returns with sleep, as our rabbis explained regarding the verse “They are renewed every morning—ample is Your grace!” (Lamentations 3:23): When it comes to a man of flesh and blood, a person gives him an object to care for but he returns it worn and broken. But man gives his spirit and his life-force to the Holy One, Blessed is He, to care for when it is worn-out and crushed, as it says, “Into Your hand I entrust my spirit” (Psalms 31:6) and He returns it to him good as new. This is the meaning of “They are renewed every morning—ample is Your grace!”

This is why our sages (*Berakhot* 4b) said not to sleep at night before prayer, nor should one eat and drink first—he should pray, because this shows that he subjugates his life-force to God; he is weary from his activities, but nevertheless he subjugates his life-force by praying.

Thus, through these three prayers a person subjugates all three of his aspects to God, as was explained—his body, his money, and his life-force to God. Every part of him thereby becomes dominated by the Cause; this is a fine interpretation.

But the interpretation which our sages explained to us in their wisdom—they who knew the secrets of wisdom—is what the said in the chapter *Tefillat ha-Shahar* (*Berakhot* 26b):

Rabbi Yose the son of Rabbi Hanina said: The patriarchs instituted the prayers. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: The prayers were instituted corresponding to the daily sacrifices. A *baraita* was taught supporting Rabbi Yose the son of Rabbi Hanina, and a *baraita* was taught supporting Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi.

A *baraita* was taught supporting Rabbi Yose the son of Rabbi Hanina: Abraham instituted the morning prayer, as it says, “Next morning, Abraham hurried to the place where he had stood before the Lord” (Genesis 19:27), and “standing” can only mean prayer, as it says, “Phineas stood and intervened,<sup>12</sup> and the plague stopped” (Psalms 106:30). Isaac instituted the afternoon prayer, as it says, “And Isaac went out to speak [*lasu’ah*] in the field toward evening” (Genesis 24:63), and “speaking” can only mean prayer, as it says, “A prayer of the lowly man when he is faint and pours forth his speech [*siho*] before the Lord” (Psalms 102:1). Jacob instituted the evening prayer, as it says, “He pleaded [*va-yifga*] at a certain place and stopped there for

12. *Vayfallel*, from the same Hebrew root as prayer.

the night" (Genesis 28:11), and "pleading" can only mean prayer, as it says, "As for you, do not pray for this people, do not raise a cry of prayer on their behalf, do not *plead* [*tifga*] with me" (Jeremiah 7:16).<sup>13</sup>

A *baraita* was taught supporting Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: Why did they say the morning prayer is until the middle of the day? Because the morning sacrifice is offered until the middle of the day. And according to Rabbi Yehuda, who says until four hours have passed—because the morning sacrifice is offered until four hours have passed. And why did they say the afternoon prayer is until evening? Because the afternoon sacrifice is offered until evening. And according to Rabbi Yehuda who says until *pelag ha-minha*<sup>14</sup>—because the afternoon sacrifice is offered until *pelag ha-minha*. And why did they say the evening prayer has no set time? Because the limbs and fat-pieces that were not consumed by evening continue burning all night. And why did they say the *musaf* ("added") prayer can be said all day? Because the additional sacrifice is offered all day. And according to Rabbi Yehuda who says until seven hours have passed—because the additional sacrifice is offered until seven hours have passed.<sup>15</sup>

This argument must be explained, for did the patriarchs really institute the prayers? Didn't Adam and Noah and all the other righteous men also pray? And when it says they instituted them corresponding to the sacrifices—did no one pray before the Men of the Great Assembly?<sup>16</sup> This is impossible.

13. To sum up this paragraph: The *baraita* supporting Rabbi Yose points out one Hebrew verb used in conjunction with each of the patriarchs, and then goes on to prove that the verb in question really can mean prayer by showing that it is used that way in another, clearer context.

14. *Pelag ha-minha* is a technical term which literally means "half the afternoon." According to the *gemara*'s conclusion, Rabbi Yehuda says the afternoon prayer may be said until one and a quarter hours before sunset, where an "hour" means one part in twelve of daylight.

15. To sum up this paragraph: The *baraita* cited in support of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi points out that the halakhic times for prayer are exactly the same as the halakhic times for the sacrifices (whether one agrees with the majority opinion on when those times are, or Rabbi Yehuda's).

This seems to be a conclusive proof that the prayers were instituted according to the daily sacrifices, not by the patriarchs. Furthermore, this theory explains the origin of the *musaf*, prayer, something that the alternative theory cannot do. That is why the *gemara* later suggests that "This should be a decisive proof against Rabbi Yose the son of Rabbi Hanina!" Rabbi Yose's alternative position is only preserved by concluding that "The patriarchs instituted the sacrifices, and the rabbis linked them to the sacrifices." (So the *musaf* prayer was added later.)

Maharal does not quote the explanation of the evening prayer according to this "sacrifices" opinion, though it will become important later in his discussion: The evening prayer was instituted corresponding to the limbs and fats (of the afternoon sacrifice) that continued to burn on the altar all night. This is probably why the evening prayer is only optional.

16. If we accept the opinion that the prayers were instituted corresponding to

But we already explained that prayer is to God in the sense that man, who is the effect, must turn to the Cause and depend on it. Therefore he prays to the Cause, and this is clear. This is what Rabbi Hanina meant by "the patriarchs instituted the prayers." Since the patriarchs were the beginning for the world—this is why they are called "the patriarchs" and not "the early righteous men"—as the whole world was created for Israel, and the patriarchs were the beginning of Israel, it is like the patriarchs were God's first effect. Now, the effect needs the Cause and depends on it, as was explained earlier. Therefore the patriarchs, who were the beginning, instituted the prayers, because prayer is what connects the effect to the Cause, namely God.

The patriarchs are the first effect with a connection to God. Each one instituted [a prayer] according to his trait: Abraham instituted the morning prayer at the beginning of the day because he was the first of the patriarchs, like morning is the beginning of the day and God is the beginning of the world. Isaac instituted the afternoon prayer after the middle of the day (which is the completion of the world, as those who know the true wisdom understand). And Jacob who came afterward instituted the evening prayer, which is last, as was Jacob. This symbolizes the fact that the world is in God's hand; we have the evening prayer at night because night shows that the world is in His hand, since a person entrusts his life-force and his spirit to God at night, as it says, "Into Your hand I entrust my spirit" (Psalms 31:6). Similarly the entire world is in the hand of the Holy One, Blessed is He, at night, as will be further explained.

This is why the evening prayer corresponds to Jacob, because Jacob is in God's hand more than the other patriarchs. The image of the "mild man" (*tam*, referring to Jacob in Genesis 25:27) is carved on the Heavenly Throne. This is why Jacob specifically instituted the evening prayer, because that prayer shows that the world is in the hand of the Holy One, Blessed is He. This is the special trait of Jacob, as is known to the wise. But this is not the place to elaborate, because the matter is very deep and is explained elsewhere.

But the general idea is that it was fitting for the patriarchs, specifically, to institute the prayers because they are like the beginning of the world. Because "beginning" is the first effect which is rooted in the Cause. These three patriarchs alone are the beginning, and therefore they instituted the three kinds of prayers we mentioned.

This is the same reason it is a mitzva to pray at sunrise, as it says in the first chapter of *Berakhhot* (9b):

Rabbi Yohanan said, "The righteous men of previous generations would finish it (*Shema*) at sunrise in order to connect *ge'ula* (the blessing following *Shema*) with prayer, and he will end up praying during daytime."

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the sacrifices, then Maharal assumes that the Men of the Great Assembly (*Anshei Keneset ha-Gedola*) are the ones who did it.

Rabbi Zeira said, "The verse teaching this is 'Let them fear You as the sun rises and before the moon, in every generation' (Psalms 72:5)."<sup>17</sup>

The meaning of this is for the rising of the sun, which is the beginning of the day, to be the time of prayer so that man, who is the effect, will be connected to his Cause, namely God, for God is his beginning.

Similarly, the afternoon prayer should be at sunset, which is the end of the day as will be explained, because God is man's completion. For this, too, there should be prayer to Him when the day is completed just as He is the completion of the world.

Afterward is the evening prayer, at night, when the world is considered to be in God's hand. This is why it is fitting to pray at night.

Further elaboration on "the patriarchs instituted the prayers" should not be done, for they are very deep matters.

According to the opinion that "the prayers were instituted corresponding to the daily sacrifices," the meaning is that God commanded the daily sacrifices to show that this world reverts to God and comes close to Him. And if it did not revert to God the world would have no independent existence, but rather that it reverts to God and was not created as an independent reality. We explained this idea in another place, that when the world receives God's bounty it reverts to its Cause. Therefore a person should bring a sacrifice to God, because sacrifice is reverting to God and coming close to Him, as we said above.

God commanded to bring a sacrifice to Him in the morning, because the world reverts to God by way of its beginning. It also reverts to God at its completion, because its End which is its completion adheres and reverts to God. For this reason it is fitting that there be a sacrifice in the morning because the morning is like the beginning of the world, and a sacrifice in the late afternoon which is the end of the day. This way the best prayer is at sunrise and sunset specifically (which<sup>18</sup> is the end of the day), were we not afraid that he would sin.<sup>19</sup>

But the limbs and fats that were not brought during the day as consumed all night on the altar. Now the morning and afternoon sacrifices mean that this world reverts to God according to the idea that He is the Beginning of

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17. According to Rabbi Zeira's midrashic interpretation, "let them fear you" means prayer, and the rest of the verse indicates that prayer should be at sunrise and at night. The Targum understands the verse this way as well, but it is not the plain meaning in context. I translated according to the midrashic meaning Rabbi Zeira intended.

18. Sunset.

19. In other words, a person should be encouraged to say the afternoon prayer just before sunset. The only reason we do not do this is that we are concerned he might lose the opportunity to pray on time altogether by waiting until the last minute for the afternoon prayer. But the best thing to do for the morning prayer is to say it immediately at sunrise.

the world, because the Effect cannot be without a Cause, and the existence of the Effect depends on the Cause. Therefore, "[You shall offer] one lamb [in the morning], and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight" (Numbers 28:4).

Now, offering the limbs and fats also shows that everything reverts to God because there is nothing besides Him. But this is not about this world, but that God, since He is One—everything reverts to Him for there is none beside Him. Therefore, sacrifice to Him is not just for the day, whose sacrifice is about the world—that is the day, but there is even sacrifice to Him at night. This is about God, who is One and there is none beside Him. Everything reverts to Him because it is unfitting for there to be anything that does not revert to Him, for when everything reverts to Him He is One and unique, as we explained at the beginning of the "Path." Therefore he offers the limbs and fats that remained from the day's offerings at night, because everything reverts to God such that He is One and there is none beside Him, and that is the end of worship and offering.

For the first two, which are the morning and afternoon prayers, are about the existence of the world which depends on its Cause; therefore these prayers are during the day and they are obligations on a person. But the evening prayer is voluntary because this prayer is not about existence, that everything exists by virtue of Him and existence reverts to Him. Rather, offering the limbs and fats is only about there being nothing besides Him. Therefore, this prayer and worship corresponding to the limbs and fats that were not consumed on the altar is at night, which is dark and not considered existence. Thus it is fitting that the prayer about existence reverting to God be during the day, but the prayer about there being nothing besides God, not about existence, be at night.

The morning and afternoon prayers correspond to the sacrifice during the day when it has form,<sup>20</sup> because form is existence. And the sacrifice is slaughtered when it has form, because this world with its form depends on God. But the evening prayer is just [parallel to] limbs and fats that were not consumed and have no form. It just [shows] that everything rises to God and nothing is left, so that there is none beside Him. And because this prayer is not about actual existence it is voluntary.

Therefore they instituted three prayers corresponding to the sacrifices to God, because prayer also shows one's dependence on His Cause, and by this he draws near to God in his prayer.

You should understand these words of Rabbi Yose, who said that "the patriarchs instituted the prayers." He thought prayer is closeness to God according to the idea that God is the world's Cause, and the patriarchs are the beginning for the world. They are the first in that God is their Cause, and therefore "the patriarchs instituted the prayers." The other opinion is that the closeness is according to the idea that the effect reverts to its Cause—this is the absolute closeness that the world has to God, and therefore they "were instituted corresponding to the daily sacrifices." For

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20. I.e., before it has been burned.



sacrifice shows that the effect returns to its Godly source. The idea of prayer has been explained to you as the scholars of the truth explained it. The matters are so deep that they cannot be explained [in full], and this is not the place to elaborate. It will be further explained in another place.

Since man was created to serve God, prayer should be immediately after he gets up from his bed and he should not turn to other things beforehand. For when a man gets up from his bed it is as if God brought his spirit back into him, for which they enacted the blessing "Who brings back souls to dead bodies." It is therefore better for prayer to be immediate. This is what they said in the first chapter of *Berakhot* (5b):

It was taught in a *baraita*: Abba Binyamin said: All my life I took pains with two things: that my prayer be before my bed, and that my bed be placed from north to south.

What does "that my prayer be before my bed" mean? If you tell me that it means "before my bed" literally,<sup>21</sup> did not Rav Yehuda say in the name of Rav (and some say Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi): How do we know that someone praying should not have anything separating between him and the wall? From when it says, "Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed" (Isaiah 38:2).

Do not say "before my bed" but say, instead, "close to [my arising from] my bed."

"And that my bed be placed from north to south"—for Rabbi Hama son of Rabbi Hanina said in the name of Rabbi Yitzhak: Whoever places his bed from north to south will have male children, as it says, "But as to your 'northern' ones, fill their bellies. They shall be satisfied with sons . . ." (Psalms 17:14). Rav Nahman son of Yitzhak said: Neither will his wife miscarry. For here it is written "but as to your 'northern' ones, fill their bellies," and it is written in another place "when her time to give birth was filled" (Genesis 25:24).

One must wonder greatly why he<sup>22</sup> took pains with these two things. The explanation of the matter is that he took pains that his "creation" should be when he was made "human." As soon as he got up from his bed in the morning he would serve his Creator, since man was created to serve his Creator. So he said that he would take pains that his prayer be "close [to arising from]" his bed, immediately, so that it would look like a man is created to serve his Maker.

This is why he also said that he would take pains that his bed be from north to south, meaning that man was also created to bring forth male children who are more given over to the service of God than females, who are under the authority of their husbands. So he would place his bed from north to south, because a man should do what is possible and what is fitting

21. I.e., in front of my bed.

22. Abba Binyamin.

for him to do to bring forth proper sons for God's service, for man was created only for the service of God. Therefore he took pains that his service of God should be immediately when he got up from his bed. Not that he took pains with his *own* service of God, but that male children for His service be brought forth from him.

You should know that the power of "north" is the power of "males"; it is called north because the sun is not found there.<sup>23</sup> Therefore blessing is from the power of "north" as they of blessed memory said, "One who wishes to become wealthy should face north" (*Bava Batra* 25b). For north represents the power of the hidden, since the light of the sun is not revealed there. And wealth and blessing [also] represent the power of the hidden, since blessing "is only for things that are hidden from the eye" (*Bava Metzia* 42a).<sup>24</sup> That is why it says, "But as to your 'northern' ones, fill their bellies. They shall be satisfied with sons" means that the power of hidden blessing is from the northern direction and that is where blessing comes from. From there "fill their bellies, they shall be satisfied with sons"—meaning males, because "male" (*zakhar*) has the same numerical value as "blessing" (*berakha*).<sup>25</sup> There is no doubt that the male represents blessing, because he corresponds to form, which is blessing. But the female corresponds to substance, which has no blessing in it, but only receives. This is why he said he placed his bed "from north to south"; he did not say "from south to north" but "from north to south" meaning that the head should be toward the north. And when he would face the north where blessing comes from, he would bring forth a male.

Now Rashi of blessed memory explained that the reason was for the honor of the Divine Presence, which is in the east or the west, so he would turn his bed in another direction. But according to this it should not have said "one who places his bed from north to south" but it should have said "whoever does *not* place his bed from east to west." Therefore the interpretation is as was explained.

But the main point of this interpretation is that these two ideas—that his prayer be close [to arising from] his bed, and that his bed be from north to south—all of it is really one idea. For when he gets up from his bed he is considered newly reborn, so he must pray to his Creator immediately, in order to take to heart that man has no existence or endurance of his own, but depends on God, and that he needs to pray before Him for his needs. And at night he would place his bed from north to south because a person returns his life-force to God. He would place his bed from north to south for this reason: for "north" is the name of the storehouse for souls, and that is where he entrusted his soul to. As it is written, "I entrust my spirit into Your hand" (Psalms 31:16). And wherever it says "hand" it means the left, as it

23. The Hebrew word for "north" (*tzafon*) is similar to the word for "hidden" (*tzafun*), like the hidden sun.

24. See chapter four of the present volume for a full citation of this passage and a discussion of its meaning.

25. *Zakhar* = 7+20+200=227; *berakha* = 2+200+20+5=227.

says, "My own hand founded the earth, my right hand spread out the skies" (Isaiah 48:13).<sup>26</sup> And "north" is "left" as it says in the second chapter of *Bava Batra* (ibid.). It is called "north" because the hidden storehouse is there, for the souls are [kept] in a storehouse. And when it brings the proof that one who places his bed from north to south will have male children, one idea really depends on the other. For since the storehouse of the souls is in the north, one who places his bed from north to south will have male sons. For the soul of the male is considered more of a "treasure" than the female, as it is known that the male is hidden and the female is revealed, as we said above. You can understand this idea from the fact that woman "go about." Because of this he would turn his bed toward the north to return the soul to the storehouse in the north. This interpretation is clear when you understand words of wisdom.

And he also said that his wife will not miscarry, because blessing from the power of the north is all complete and perfect; but when a woman miscarries it is a deficiency and there is no blessing from that aspect.

You should also understand that when she miscarries the embryo goes out into the world and is revealed before its time. For the embryo hidden in its mother's womb is hidden and secret but not revealed. This is why his wife will not miscarry when his bed is from north to south. And it is very clear to those who are discerning.

### QUESTIONS ON CHAPTER THREE

1. Maharal explained the two talmudic opinions on the origins of prayer at great length. If we accept his symbolic interpretation of these opinions, then would you say that the two opinions disagree on a fundamental level or not? In other words, is it a *radical* disagreement or a small shift in emphasis?
2. What do you think Maharal means when he says that the evening prayer is voluntary because it is not about "actual existence"?
3. According to Maharal's interpretation of the opinion that prayer corresponds to the sacrifices, is there any difference between what the two daytime prayers symbolize?
4. Maharal's lengthy discussion of beds being from north to south, and the "hidden" power of "blessing" in the "north," may be hard for many readers to swallow. In addition, what he says about "male" and "female" may be offensive to some contemporary readers.

But keep in mind that Maharal is applying a *symbolic* system here. And matching "male" and "female" to "form" and "substance" respectively, with the male "form" giving and the female "substance" receiving was a standard notion in medieval philosophy.

The important question is this: Once we get to the bottom of the

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26. I.e., one hand did one thing and the other hand did the other. So when the first part of the verse simply said "hand" alone, it meant the left.

symbolism, what fundamental idea about the *nature* of prayer did Maharal find in *both* of Abba Binyamin's statements?

## ON PUBLIC PRAYER (FROM CHAPTERS 5 AND 6)

### From Chapter 5:

In the first chapter of *Berakhot* (8a) Rabbi Levi said: Whoever has a synagogue in his city and does not enter there to pray is called a wicked neighbour, as it says, "Thus says the Lord: As for my wicked neighbours who encroach on the heritage [that I gave to my people Israel . . .]" (Jeremiah 12:14). Not only this, but he causes exile for himself and his children, as it continues, "I am going to uproot them from their soil, and I will uproot the House of Judah out of the midst of them" (*ibid.*).

They thus explained that whoever does not go to the synagogue is called a wicked neighbour. It may be explained that he is a wicked neighbour to people, because people assemble in the synagogue to pray. Its very name indicates that it is the designated place for the people of the city to gather to pray to their Maker,<sup>27</sup> and that prayer is designated to be at a gathering, in public.

So if he does not enter there, then he does not desire this joining together and gathering, to gather for prayer. So he is called a wicked neighbour, because the idea of a wicked neighbour is that he separates from his neighbour (which is his nation).

All the more so is he considered a wicked neighbour to God, because he should go to the synagogue and be present in God's house. For God is present in the synagogue, and it is fitting for a person to be present in the house where God is found. If he doesn't come there he is called a wicked neighbour, because he has no connection to the one whom he dwells near, for if he were not a wicked neighbour he would come there.

And he<sup>28</sup> said that he causes exile for himself and his children—because the synagogue is designated for gathering and assembly, and when he doesn't want assembly and gathering he is fit for exile, for exile is nothing else than separation and dispersion. This matter is clear.

Also, were he a good neighbour and not a wicked neighbour, the way of neighbours is to stand together and not be split, so he would not have had to face exile. But since he is now a wicked neighbour, assembly doesn't befit him, but only exile and separation both for him and his children. For when the root is uprooted from where it is attached, the branches are also uprooted from its place. This is why he causes exile for himself and for his children.

27. The Hebrew term for "synagogue," namely *Beit ha-Kenesset*, literally means "house of gathering."

28. Rabbi Levi.

## From Chapter 6:

And in the first chapter of *Berakhot* (5b) it was taught in a *baraita*: Abba Binyamin said: A person's prayer is only heard in the synagogue, as it says, "and hear the rejoicing and prayer" (1 Kings 8:28)—prayer should be in the place of rejoicing, and the place of rejoicing is the synagogue, which is designated for the public, such that the *sheli'ah tzibbur* is forced to raise his voice.<sup>29</sup> This is why the synagogue is called a place of rejoicing.

And the reason<sup>30</sup> is that it is written concerning prayer, "For what great nation is there that has a god so close at hand as is the Lord our God whenever we call upon Him?" (Deuteronomy 4:7). God is close to a person in the synagogue because His Presence is there, such that he hears their prayers. Understand this.

## QUESTIONS REGARDING "ON PUBLIC PRAYER"

1. Maharal suggests that a person who doesn't pray in the synagogue may be considered a "wicked neighbour" to both man and God. But which interpretation is better supported by the verse Rabbi Levi cited in the Talmud?
2. What does Maharal add to the biblical idea that God is "close at hand" for Israel? Is his interpretation supported by the verse?
3. Compare Maharal's reasons why public prayer is so important to those of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi (in reading 3).

29. Presumably, in song and praise of God ("rejoicing"). This whole interpretation follows the verse as understood by the Talmud and Rashi, namely that *rina* in the verse cited refers to the songs and praises in the holy Temple.

30. I.e., the reason *why* prayer should be in the synagogue.



## Reading 8. Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira on Prayer

### *Hovat ha-Talmidim* / A Student's Obligation

#### INTRODUCTION

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira (1889–1943) was known as the *rebbe* of Piaseczno during and after his lifetime, but after his martyrdom at the hands of Nazi murderers he also became known as the *rebbe* of the children of the Warsaw ghetto.

Reb Kalonymus was always deeply concerned with children, for their well-being and their spiritual growth. His most famous work, *Hovat ha-Talmidim*<sup>1</sup> ("A Student's Obligation"), which was also the only one of his books to be published during his lifetime, is addressed directly to a young child, a student. But it still speaks to every one of us, no matter what our age. Studying *Hovat ha-Talmidim* has become widespread in *yeshivot*, as a guide to spiritual development and self-education to become a true *hasid*. On a personal level, it has been a great help to me in better understanding *hasidut*, and Reb Kalonymus's advice on prayer has had a direct positive impact on my *kavana*.

Other books by Reb Kalonymus were published after his lifetime: *Hakhsharat ha-Avrekhim* and *Mevo ha-She'arim* are sequels to *Hovat ha-Talmidim*; *Tzav ve-Ziruz* is a collection of exhortations aimed at older

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1. A beautiful new edition with punctuation, vowelization, and a biographical essay on the author by Aharon Sorasky, is published by the Piaseczno hasidim (Tel Aviv, no date).

hasidim.<sup>2</sup> But most striking of all is *Eish Kodesh* ("Holy Fire," which he originally called "Torah Novellae from the years of Wrath, 1940–1942"). The manuscript of this book was miraculously discovered in the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto along with a letter asking that they be sent to followers in the Holy Land should they ever be discovered. They were discovered and published.

The following translation of two major digressions on prayer in *Hovat ha-Talmidim* is taken from *A Student's Obligation: Advice from the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto*, translated by Micha Odenheimer (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc. 1991).<sup>3</sup> The first is from *Hovat ha-Talmidim* proper, the second from the collection of three essays that Reb Kalonymus included as appendices to the book.

### *Hovat ha-Talmidim: Text*

#### FROM *HOVAT HA-TALMIDIM* CHAPTER 9: "ADVICE ON GROWTH AND SELF-IMPROVEMENT"<sup>4</sup>

Gradually accustom your heart and soul to open and pour outward toward God, in meditation and prayer. Both children and adults whose spiritual knowledge is undeveloped think that the troubles and concerns that are the impetus for prayer are really what prayer is all about. Their approach to prayer is comparable to the approach a poor man might take when asking a rich man for help, or that of a commoner imploring a king for aid or salvation. But only an ignorant person thinks of praying in this fashion, thus depriving it of its spiritual significance as if its whole meaning derived from calamities and disturbances, and believes that if he had no pressing necessities he would not need prayer. In reality, it is the process of prayer itself, during which the heart is drawn close to God and the soul flows out toward Him, that is the most important aspect of prayer. Moreover, as you will see in the following words from the *Midrash*, not only does prayer not derive its importance from our crises and troubles, but at times God sends troubles and concerns our way in order to provoke us to pray. The *Midrash* (Exodus *Rabbah* 1) says: "Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi stated: 'To what can it (prayer) be compared? To a king who was travelling and heard the voice of a princess who was being attacked by bandits crying out for help. The king saved her. After a time, he decided that he wanted to marry her. He tried to speak to her, but she refused to speak to him. What did the king do? He sent

2. All three are published together in a single volume (Jerusalem: Piaseczno Hasidim, 1964).

3. Much of the information in this brief introduction is taken from the introduction to the same volume, by Aharon Sorasky.

4. *A Student's Obligation*, pp. 70–75 (84–91 in the Hebrew).

the bandits out to frighten her again, so that she would cry out to him for help and he would have the opportunity to hear and respond to her.”

You certainly understand on your own the significance of this parable. Your soul is a princess that the Holy One blessed be He wishes to marry—that is to say He wants the soul to draw near to Him and unite with Him in holiness. To accomplish this it is necessary to speak to God and to pray to Him. For through inner prayer that emerges from the recesses of the heart, the soul is awakened from its slumber. It longs for and then unites with the King, the King of the universe. This is the primary purpose and goal of prayer. Certain problems are visited on a person specifically to cause him to pray and cry out to God from the depths of his heart and soul, just as the king in the parable sent the bandits to frighten the princess so that she would cry out to him. When you wish to awaken your soul and to prevent it from sleeping or withdrawing deeper under cover during prayer, you too should rouse yourself at first by concentrating on those things that pain you or that you need. To this end, you should focus during the formal *Amidah* on your immediate needs and desires, both spiritual and material. For example, during the prayers for spiritual knowledge (“You grace man with wisdom”) and repentance (“Return us, Father, to our Torah”), focus on the longing inside you that God open your heart and soul to Torah and divine service. During the prayer for a bountiful year (“Bless us with a good year”), which is not only about agriculture and crops, but about material sustenance in general, pour your soul out and stir up your heart as you ask God to send your parents a means of livelihood. While you pray, your soul will awaken and be revealed, and will unite with its King, to whom it belongs. Soon this will occur not only when you are praying for your personal needs. Once you have accustomed your soul to rise and to awaken, you will find yourself even more suffused with true fiery passion when you are focused on godly matters. When you recite “You are holy and Your name is holy” your soul will become activated and will actually feel itself standing right before the source of holiness, directly addressing this source and praising Him. Inflamed, your soul will dissolve into the lovely, holy pleasantness of the Holy One of Israel. You will be similarly inspired during all of prayer.

You should not confine this kind of prayer to the three obligatory services of the morning, afternoon, and evening. All day, you should try to find free moments when you can meditate before God in prayer and song. The more you accustom yourself to this kind of soul-meditation, the softer your heart will become. Your spirit will lift, and your soul will draw closer to God.

You will be able, however, to rouse your soul to speak to God only if you strengthen the cognitive basis of your faith. You must think about how God’s glory fills the whole universe, and how you yourself exist within Him and His holiness, even though you cannot see Him. More than a single thought is necessary. The more you reflect on these matters of faith, over and over again, constantly, the easier it will become to stimulate your soul to speak to God—Who faces you at all times.

It may still be difficult for you to imagine that you are standing before



God, and that your soul, during prayer, has become stirred and inflamed because it is actually in the presence of Him whose glory fills the whole universe. You exist, after all, in a material world, your eyes see only the physical universe, and your hands touch only concrete matter. Look then toward the sky and contemplate, focus your mind and think: I exist on this side, while on the other side of the heavens, there is another world, completely different from this one. There are angels there, and seraphim; the souls of the patriarchs and of the prophets and *tzaddikim*. The throne of glory is suspended in their midst, and God, great, holy, and awesome, is present on the throne. In this world, God is hidden, while there His splendorous presence is very much apparent and revealed. Strengthen yourself, look, and think some more. "I stand on this side of the divine, and I say 'Blessed are You, O Lord.' It is You, Lord, the one toward Whom I lift my eyes, whether I see You or not, it is You that I bless. I shut my eyes and look at You, and bless You and speak to You."

Listen and you will hear how far your gaze reaches, what you reach when you lift your eyes toward God. The *Tur Orach Chayim* quotes some of the following passage, which is found in the *Sefer Heichalot*: "The Lord has said, 'Oh, you heavens, and you angelic beings who descend past the holy Chariot, you will be blessed by God if you tell My children how I respond when they sanctify Me and recite "Holy, holy, holy." Teach them to lift their eyes toward where their prayers are received (that is, toward heaven—"and this is the gate of heaven"), tell them to lift themselves upward. My greatest pleasure in the world is to see them lift their eyes toward Me; My eyes gaze back into their eyes, I grip the throne of glory, which has the image of Jacob impressed upon it, I lovingly embrace and kiss every Jew, I remember their exile and speed up the process of their redemption.'"

What can we say in the face of such a description? Picture it to yourself. Our eyes look upward, as if we were looking directly into His eyes. He gazes back at us and is delighted by our gaze. It is as if parent and child were looking at each other's face; the father cannot restrain himself, his love overwhelms him and he reaches out and hugs and kisses his child. The heart dissolves in bliss and longing, the soul bursts out of its confines and in fiery enthusiasm calls out: "Toward my Father, my Holy One, I rise, I fly."

Look at the sky and meditate on these things. Strengthen and give courage to your eyes and your heart, and gaze with intensity and concentration. Be especially aware when addressing God as "You"; even if you are not gazing skyward at that exact moment be very aware of the meaning of "You." Focus your mind on the fact that it is God Who is before you, God Whom you are addressing as "You."

Please do not think that the only way to arouse and awaken your soul are through the techniques we have described. This is not the case. Every Jew who has a minimum of internal self-discipline, every Jew who works on himself, will from time to time discover methods and means that aid him in arousing his soul, igniting and inspiring it to transcend the body, its usual hiding place, and draw closer to God.

At times, thoughts and flashes of awakening that you had neither anticipated nor prepared for will visit you. For example, you may be in the

middle of the prayer service during the Days of Awe. The congregation is beginning to sing songs of praise to God, such as "You are our God," and you begin to sing with them. All of a sudden your heart is gripped by fear. Now is the time, you realize, that all the beings of the supernal worlds, along with beings of the lower worlds, sing to the great God Who transcends all of them. What connection do I, degraded as I am, have to them? How do I have the audacity to blend my voice in with the voices of those who sing to God and cause Him to rejoice?

Suddenly, it is as if a spirit of life, of strength, were blown into you. You realize: This is the way it is when great joy is manifest in the world! The bands and orchestra with their instruments march, playing through the streets, accompanied by the wedding party, while all the important guests celebrate joyfully. The ragged barefoot children, their clothes tattered and their faces blackened with dirt, chase after the wedding procession, racing and clapping, singing and celebrating. This is also considered part of the honor accorded the bride and groom and the wedding. Your soul perceives, at that moment, the great choir of angels that is singing before God. The children of Israel join them in song from the lower worlds. Together they sing to the King of glory while He listens attentively, joyful and majestic. Like a barefoot, raggedly child, you have chased and joined this group, and along with the holy choir you sing a song to the God whom you have longed for. Your joy increases, your spirit expands to the breaking point in a state of great excitement, until at times your heart seems to melt and you begin to cry more freely even than you cried at Kol Nidre.

This spontaneous arousal will occur only if you labor over and over again to awaken your soul so as not to sleep away the seventy years of your life with a heart of stone. Know that even among our *tzaddikim* and holy men, who elevated themselves and achieved a closeness to God that is impossible for us even to grasp, there were those who used all kinds of different methods and techniques to rouse their pure and holy souls when they were first setting out along their paths. The book *House of Aaron*, for example, describes how the *tzaddikim* would imagine, just before they got up to pray, that they were lying in their graves, experiencing much suffering, until someone came by and said "Rise, stand up and pray." You yourself can picture how imagining that scenario in a vivid way would add tremendous vigor and intensity to prayer. And you, diligent student, if you make use of different techniques and work at them, you are also capable of reaching greatness that is beyond your capacity at present to imagine.

This is the fundamental choice that is offered you: to awaken and uplift yourself and draw a little closer to holiness. And at the moment of your ascent, look down from the perspective of your pure and elevated soul on the smallness that you usually keep yourself locked into. Look at your capacity for laziness and at the other undesirable qualities that affect you. Look at the lowly state of consciousness you normally exist in, with your petty thoughts and desires. You yourself will feel ashamed of them. Address yourself antagonistically: "Why do I lie around all day in a muddy pit, a virtual outhouse of childishness and foolishness? From now on I take it upon myself to become a Jew who is a servant of God. Master of the

Universe, I want to be a Jew! I accept upon myself to be Your true servant." Repeat these kind of thoughts and speeches a number of times; with God's help they will aid you a great deal. One of the natural laws of the soul is that it will submit to words that are spoken from the heart. You can seduce and convince another with words that emerge from your heart and soul; certainly you can influence yourself decisively in the same way, providing you speak your words at a time when you have raised yourself to spiritual heights and are in a state of self-transcendence.

## QUESTIONS

1. In what ways should Reb Kalonymus's idea of prayer be thought of as "simple prayer," and in what ways not?
2. What is the subtle difference between the midrash that Reb Kalonymus cites (about the king and the princess), and this famous talmudic statement: "Rabbi Yitzhak said, 'Why were our patriarchs barren? Because the Holy One, Blessed is He, desires the prayers of the righteous.'" (*Yevamot* 64a)?
3. Reb Kalonymus stresses using the imagination to arouse one's soul for prayer, visualizing various ideas and scenes that can lift the student from his physical day-to-day life. What earlier thinker in one of the previous readings advocated something similar? It is there any difference between the two?

## FROM "TORAH, PRAYER, AND SINGING TO GOD"<sup>5</sup>

Since we wish to discuss the arousal of the *Ruach*<sup>6</sup> and *Nefesh*,<sup>7</sup> and not the intellect,<sup>8</sup> we will not be able to explain ourselves using intellectual analyses or logical arguments. We will have to instead bring some examples from the world. Is it possible, for instance, to explain the following fact using logic or analysis? Take a person whose spirit is diffuse, whose thoughts are scattered and insignificant and have no general theme connecting them to a single great nexus. Imagine that such a person wishes to

5. The second essay of "Three Essays for Senior Students and Young Married Scholars," section B, found at the end of *Hovat ha-Talmidim. A Student's Obligation*, pp. 162–168 (189–197 in the Hebrew).

6. The *nefesh* is the life-force of the physical body which Reb Kalonymus (p. 143) describes as inhabiting the liver (because the liver was once thought to control the flow of blood instead of the heart). This is the lowest aspect of a person's spiritual being.

7. *Ruach* is higher than *Nefesh*; it dwells in the heart and is a person's emotional being.

8. The intellect is the *Neshama* in Hebrew, the highest aspect of a person's being dwelling in his body. But it is not easily aroused to God's service as are *Nefesh* and *Ruach*, which are technically beneath it.

unite all his thoughts, direct them toward one central point; he will certainly find such a task very difficult indeed. Yet, say he arrives that evening at a Simchat Torah celebration and begins to dance with all his might. Suddenly he is transformed, healed. If he had refrained from dancing, his psyche would have stayed in its weakened condition. As he danced, he was not necessarily in a state of expanded consciousness. He may have had only simple thoughts, such as these: "This is God's Torah. For her sake, we have spilled our blood constantly. I will dance and rejoice with my God, with the Torah, which is my soul and my life." During the course of the dancing, he feels himself cleansed of all profane worries and concerns; they fall away from him like sand and dust from a coat one has shaken in the wind. His soul is refined and elevated, his inner thoughts and feelings become purified, bright, and clear as the sky. The fact that a physical activity—dancing—has had such a profound effect on his soul and mind cannot be explained logically. Yet this is true: physical activities stimulate the soul, strengthen it, and to an extent reveal it.

Take another example. At times, a person may wish to pray with an awakened heart and an aroused soul and yet he finds himself unable; his heart and soul are blocked. He starts to pronounce the words of the prayer out loud, as the holy books suggest, not for the sake of the volume, but as if he were straining to roll away a boulder that has been stopping up the source of his heart and soul. He says the words of the prayer as they were intended when they were written—that is, he doesn't just try to understand what each word means—he tries to mean the words. For example, when he says "Praise God, call on His name," he imagines himself standing opposite the whole world and shouting out to them: "Give praise to God—are you all asleep? Call out His name!" If he were to simply think this intention in his heart, as he whispered the words, it would not have the same effect. Calling out loud awakens his *Nefesh*, to an extent, and excites it to pray passionately. Why is the voice more capable of arousing the soul than the intellect? The *Nefesh* and *Ruach* are both spiritually higher and lower than the intellect. They are lower because the *Neshamah*, which is the source of the life of the intellect, is higher than *Nefesh* and *Ruach*. They are higher because they have an ability to reveal the soul that surpasses that of wisdom and mind.

So it is that in our generation, our condition is such that we are incapable of investigating or knowing any spiritual matter utilizing the intellect. Even more, our attempts just to awaken ourselves, to reveal a little of the inner quality of our soul as it exists beyond the obscuring barrier of our body, are more successful when we use techniques that grip the *Ruach* and *Nefesh*, rather than using study and reflection (which appeal only to the intellect). We don't mean to suggest that the soul can be awakened and become manifest only through the efforts of the body and its activities in fulfilling the commandments; these must be combined with the right intentions and with thought. Even in the two examples we provided—dancing and praying—nothing would have been accomplished without the accompaniment of thought. Dancing alone would have done nothing. Only when the dancer concentrated fiercely on God and the Torah—and these thoughts

were the focus of his dancing and rejoicing—were his *Nefesh* and *Ruach* aroused. Similarly, shouting out the prayers would not have worked to stimulate his *Nefesh* and *Ruach*; this method was effective only after he had grown concerned about how closed his heart had become, and after he had imagined himself standing before God at the very moment of prayer. Actions are ineffective without thought, as are thoughts without their appropriate actions. But only clear, powerful thoughts can assist actions as they are being performed. Intellectual reflection will not be effective, and thus the Talmud says: "One should get up to pray only from the midst of a clear decision of Halachah." It is worth studying the letter included in the *Siddur HaRav* (Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi's prayerbook) that says that one should not attempt to keep in mind all the individual details of the meaning and proper intention of all the various prayers as one is praying, even if one is intellectually capable of doing so. One should instead keep in mind only the essence of the right intention. Concentration on all the details of the intentions should be during study period only; this does not apply, however, to the recitation of the *Shema* wherein one must concentrate in detail. The main thing is to think with great strength about God, and how He fills the entire world with his glory.

As we have already said, this kind of thinking has its source in our *Ruach* and *Nefesh*, and unites with our actions in causing the *Ruach* and *Nefesh*, as well as the *Neshamah*, to become more clearly manifest. We need not hesitate to say this, for the *Pardes* (Gate 10:1) has already written that a person can become spiritually aroused all the way up to the *Neshamah* through his physical senses. The text there talks about seeing colors; white or black, for example, stimulates the *Ruach*, and through the *Ruach* the *Neshamah* is stimulated as well. This is because the special "Israelite" aspect of the soul has contracted itself so as to abide within the human dimensions of the person too. When the physical "human" aspects of a person is stimulated, his *Nefesh*, *Ruach*, and *Neshamah* are aroused as well. This general principle applies to all matters of the *Ruach* and *Nefesh*: our generation, and in particular, individuals who are beginning to serve God, and wish to uncover their *Nefesh* and *Ruach*, should concentrate on and grasp hold of the human part of their being in order to accomplish this awakening. This is just like the fact that someone who wants to understand the lovely scent of the rose must first learn all about its biology and structure as a plant. Only afterwards can the delightful scent be truly reached and known.

We are not suggesting that a person can be spiritually awakened and filled with holiness without devoting his intelligence and his mind to holiness and Torah. We are merely saying that it is difficult for the ordinary person to become spiritually aroused through the activities of the intellect. Still, it is crucial for such a person to be immersed in Torah and holiness. And to the extent that he devotes himself—not just part of himself but his whole being, his body and his *Nefesh* and his actions, his emotions and his *Ruach* and his thoughts, his mind and his intellect and his reflections—to that extent will spiritual phenomena, such as *Sefirot* and the supernal worlds, become increasingly manifest in him.

At first he will feel only the kind of attractions and awe one might feel

before a king. Then his feelings will begin to come in the form of fiery passion. For since the light of God's holiness is shining upon him with great intensity—and even if he does not perceive it consciously, his soul feels it—he is standing closer to God. His spirit burns passionately with love and awe; he experiences shame as he feels the eyes of God looking at him, penetrating his entire body and soul with their glance. At times, he longs for God so much, he actually feels his heart ache with yearning. On occasion the spirit, called “children of prophets,” rests upon him to such an extent that a spark from the supernal source of splendor and harmony appears in front of his soul and glimpses the brilliance of heavenly beauty and a ray from the lustrous majesty of He who lights up the whole world. He will not be fully conscious of what he is experiencing; he will just feel within himself a sense of absorption and bliss, a pleasantness and joy emanating towards him from above and drawing him upwards, until he feels compelled to sing songs and praises to God.

This phenomenon cannot be explained in a rational way, as it is not a rational phenomenon. However, we can try to grasp it with an illustration. Imagine a child, so filled with love for his father that he can't hold himself back; he runs over to him, kisses him, and still filled with love hovers about him and says: “My dear father, my sweet father, my wise father!” He is not in the middle of telling his friends how great his father is—what causes him to pronounce such endearments? Why does he suddenly compare his father to a sweet honeycomb? The passionate love induced by the presence of his father overwhelmed him; he had to express himself, and his expressions took the form of familiar thoughts and words.

This is the distinction between the kinds of praise that one is forbidden to add to those Moshe Rabbainu annunciated and the Men of the Great Assembly fixed in our prayer; and the songs of praise that have been added since, such as “The Song of Unity” (*Shir Hayichud*), “I Shall Sing with Pleasantness” (*Anim Zmirot*), “Every Living Soul” (*Nishmat*), and others. It is forbidden to attempt to add to the description of God's greatness, as we learn from the words of Rabbi Channina in the Talmud. Rabbi Channina recognized that the person he had rebuked for adding to the praises of God was engaged in merely trying to describe God's greatness—which is forbidden. But we may add to those hymns and songs that we sing out of the great passion and longing of our souls. We preface the song of praise *Anim Zmirot* with the verse: “I shall compose pleasant psalms and weave hymns, because my soul yearns for You. As I speak of Your glory, my heart longs for Your love.” Only afterward, because of our yearning, do we continue, “Therefore I shall speak of Your glories and shall honor Your name with loving songs.” We do not attempt to describe or complete the praises of God. All we desire is to reveal the spark that was ignited within us. Nor do we merely want to tell the praises of God as we would a story. We don't want just to convey the content and meaning of the words and phrases. The words and phrases of God's praise are enveloped in an additional level of soul. To merely describe a specific act of God might take only two or three words; to extract the divine spirit above and beyond the words—to do this we need to add anew.

One who simply describes God's greatness and His praise is like a person who reports that somewhere far away, there is a great light. But to actually sing God's praise is like bringing a candle back from the faraway light to this world. It is thus connected to the prophetic dimension that is within us, through song and spiritedness, some of this aspect—the aspect of prophecy—is revealed. The *Targum* renders the verb “to prophesy” as “to praise” in its translation of the following passage: “And a chain of prophets approached, and the spirit of God poured out over him, and he prophesied among them.” The spirit of prophecy called “child of the prophets” was aroused within him; he looked and perceived a spark of God's lustrous majesty; his soul trembled in great agitation until he was unable to bear it, until he felt compelled to speak and express himself in words and praises and inspired descriptions. Not that this kind of praise is all that prophecy is about, all it contains. Here we are only describing the lesser prophetic spirit that is present in every Jew.

Sometimes a Jew will be moved to sing without any reason or cause, simply because his soul became impassioned at that moment, just as it does sometimes as one performs acts of devotion to God. This kind of spontaneous arousal is especially likely to occur on Shabbat and on the holidays, when one experiences a heightened degree of sanctity, and when one is filled with joy—joy being one of the necessary preconditions of song. Then there are songs composed or sung after a miracle. After a miracle, one is obligated to thank and praise God, but aside from the obligation, one's soul itself presses one to praise God. This kind of praise is not only thanksgiving for the miracle, equivalent to the homage one would pay to a human king who has been generous toward one. It is also the result of the closer bonding to God, in faith, love, and joy, that the miracle has created. The additional suffusion of *Ruach* and *Neshamah* that radiates within a hint of the shine of the beauty and glory of the higher worlds must be expressed through words of praise. The *Midrash Rabbah* (*Beshalach* 23) says that through their faith, the children of Israel merited inspiration from the holy spirit that enabled them to sing the Song at the Sea. They were not simply telling about an event they had witnessed. The inspiration of the holy spirit was a necessary prerequisite to their singing.

Moreover, the salvation God sends to Israel is also an emanation of His light and holiness. It unfolds through various stages and penetrates into all of a person's physical vessels, into all his needs, until even his bodily desires, such as his need for physical sustenance, are fulfilled. This is in accordance with the principle that we stated previously, that the special holiness of Israel descends all the way down into all the human aspects of a Jew. The *Kedushat Levi* (*The Holiness of Levi*) by Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, states that salvation originates from above as a formless ether. It takes on form in this world according to the needs of the recipient. Therefore, since in receiving salvation each individual is actually receiving divine light from on high, his heart rings with song to God.

The prophets and *tzaddikim* of previous eras saw the precious light of God and His splendorous glory explicitly, because they were suffused with much light. A great deal was revealed to them. They were therefore able to sing new songs, and in this way to express through the holy spirit that

enveloped their words, what they had seen. They praised His glory, His majesty, the precious beauty of His greatness. One of the phrases from the Song at the Sea, "This is my God, and I will glorify Him," expresses this notion. A person who has perceived a level of spirituality, of holiness, with such clarity of vision and such explicitness of knowledge that he can say "this" (as if he were pointing right at the object of his praise), will then be able to glorify and praise God with a new song.

In our lowly generation, our vision is so limited that we are confined to merely feeling passion, longing, bliss. Our experience is not clear and precise enough to express ourselves with exactness and explicitness, especially in the diaspora, where we are bereft of even the holiness of the Land of Israel, which in itself inspires and added level of vision and song. We are unable, therefore, to add to the songs composed in previous generations, which were inspired by prophecy and the holy spirit. All we can do is sing to God in the words of the sacred songs of earlier eras. Through the words of their songs, which are filled with all the visions of God that a Jew might see, we arouse our souls to perceive with the special prophetic capacity; our prophetic spark is uncovered, becomes manifest. Even though we are not composing new songs or adding to the words and phrases, we are adding something new—new soul-light, new vision that our soul perceived in its state of excitation.

We can compare this to a short-sighted man who sees something in the distance but is not certain exactly what it is. He sees a white shape, surrounded by green and black and other colors. A man who has excellent vision comes toward him and says: "See that white? It's the palace of the king. The green is the garden surrounding it." Quickly, the short-sighted man jumps in and adds: "Yes, yes, I see it now! What a beautiful palace and garden! The black—why those are the ministers of the king! It seems to me that I even see the king's splendor shining out from among them." The man is moved and excited by the beauty of the kingdom, awed by its glory.

But this will happen only if the short-sighted man is able to see a little bit at least, even if he can't quite distinguish or express what it is he is seeing. If he can see nothing, or if he closes his eyes and does not look, the descriptions conveyed to him by the clear-sighted man will not have any effect on him.

Only a person who sings in this fashion is really singing to God. Otherwise, he is just repeating the words a prophet said thousands of years ago, words that everybody already knows.

## QUESTIONS

1. Reb Kalonymus urges "clear, powerful thoughts" instead of "intellectual reflection" as aids to *kavvana*. Which previous thinkers would definitely have agreed with this, and which would have definitely disagreed? How do you know?
2. Specifically, how does the role of the emotions versus the intellect in prayer compare to Rabbi Yosef Albo's view (reading 6, chapter 17)?



3. How does Reb Kalonymus understand Rabbi Channina's statement about not adding new praises very differently than Rambam did (reading 4, 1:59)?
4. Reb Kalonymus wrote that the voice is "more capable of arousing the soul than the intellect." Why is this so? What other previous thinker stressed that speaking the words in a sincere tone of voice can arouse *kavvana*?
5. Reb Kalonymus's defense of poetic praises of God is very similar to Maharal's (which we read in the section on "Music and Poetry" in chapter twelve). Describe how.
6. "All we can do is sing to God in the words of the sacred songs of earlier eras." Would Maharal have agreed with this too? How should these songs be said so that a person is "really singing" to God instead of "just repeating words"?



## Reading 9. The Many Possible Meanings of "Kavvana"

by David R. Blumenthal

The following essay originally appeared in *Understanding Jewish Mysticism: A Source Reader*, vol. 2 (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1982), pp. 112–114 as part of a section originally entitled "Kavvana: The Art of Spiritual Consciousness-Raising." It is reprinted here with permission as a splendid illustration of the wide range of meaning inherent in the word "*kavvana*," which we touched upon in Part Two: "*Kavvana* for Prayer in Jewish Thought." After reading it, please consider the further points raised in the study questions.

### Text

Can you hum a melody and think a thought? Can you dislike a person and yet be polite? Can you knowingly do something wrong? If you can do any of these things (and all of us can do them), then you know what "multiple consciousness" means. It means that we, in the course of our normal lives, can sustain several different levels of awareness in us at the same time.

What do you have in mind when you "recite" prayers? What do you think of when you "participate" in a religious service? What do you have in your consciousness when you "pray"? These questions, too, reflect our ability to sustain multiple consciousness—in particular, the multiple consciousness which we call "religious" or "spiritual." To pray means more than to "say one's prayers." It is to raise one's religious consciousness. It is to focus one's spiritual senses.

The traditional Jewish term for spiritual consciousness-raising is *Kavvana*. *Kavvana* is a consciousness-raising technique; that is, it is a technique for broadening one's awareness of what one is doing. The technique is accomplished by directing one's thoughts and one's awareness to the various aspects of what one is doing. In Hebrew, there is a verb, *lakhavven et ha-lev*, which literally means "to direct the heart" but can also be translated as "to do (something) with attentiveness." The result of the use of *Kavvana*, as is the case with all consciousness-raising techniques, is to change an act from a routine, or semi-conscious, act into an experience in which one is more fully present and more fully aware of all the realities touched.

One way to elucidate the nature of *Kavvana* is by example, and I present here an example of the various modes of *Kavvana* and the levels internal to each mode as an indication of the range of living religious reality within traditional Rabbinic Judaism.

On certain holidays, the liturgy prescribes the recitation of Psalms 113–118, which together are called *Hallel* ("Praise"). Towards the end of Psalm 118 (verse 25), the Psalmist writes: "Please, Lord, save, please; Please, Lord, grant success, please." This verse can be recited with varying levels of awareness. At the lowest level, it is recited as a matter of routine, in a semi-conscious manner, with the person reciting it being vaguely aware of doing what he is supposed to do. This is called *keva*, or *she-lo lishma*—that is, mindless prayer. It is prayer without *Kavvana*.

[1] In one mode of *Kavvana*, the rabbinic Jew reciting this verse must become aware of the various meanings of the words. He must first become aware of their simple, direct meaning. Then he must become aware of their context within this very beautiful Psalm, which itself speaks of "crying from the straits" and God's response. On a broader level, such a person would have to become aware of the rabbinic regulations regarding the recitation of this verse: that it is recited by the leader first and then the congregation; that on Sukkot there are prescribed movements of the *Lulav* (palm branch) and *Etrog* (citron) which accompany the recitation of this verse, and that all movements cease when the word "Lord" is said; and so on. On still a broader level, such a person would have to become aware of the report in the Mishna (*Sukka* 4:5) concerning the circumambulation of the altar during which this verse was recited, and that according to another Sage, a strange metamorphosis of this verse was recited: "I and *ho*, save, please," and that this metamorphosed version occurs in the later liturgy and is reputed to have magical properties. At the outer limits of this mode of *Kavvana*, the praying rabbinic Jew would be aware of the kabbalistic "unifications" attendant upon recitation of this verse and he would "make" them.

[2] In a different mode of *Kavvana*, the rabbinic Jew reciting this verse must become aware of what it is he is praying for, of that from which he wishes to be "saved," of that kind of "success" he wishes to have. He must begin with simple personal needs: health, sustenance, strength, love, [and insight. He must then broaden his awareness to include the needs of his] family, immediate and more remote. More broadly, he must make himself aware of the needs of Jews elsewhere: their need for peace, for security, for freedom. And more broadly still, such a person must make himself aware of

the need of mankind for peace, for sustenance, and for life. At the outer limits of this mode of *Kavvana*, the praying rabbinic Jew would have to become aware of himself and, indeed, of all people, as truly, existentially alone, separated from one another by the silence that separates all being, and that his prayer is a primal cry into eternity for himself, for his children, and for all people everywhere.

[3] In a different mode of *Kavvana*, the rabbinic Jew reciting this verse must become aware of himself. He must first become aware of his own physical presence; then of his presence in the congregation of worshippers; then of his presence in the greater congregation of worshipping Jews the world over; then of his presence in the greater congregation of worshipping Jews through time; and so on. On a broader level, such a person would have to become aware of those brothers of the flesh and spirit who cannot pray, whose lives were cut off in the crematoria; that they, too, deserve to have their prayers recited; and that through this mode of *Kavvana*, the praying rabbinic Jew becomes more than himself. His consciousness becomes the instantiation of theirs. His presentness becomes their presentness, and he speaks, or rather cries out, for them too.

[4] In a different mode of *Kavvana*, the rabbinic Jew reciting this verse must become aware of God. He must become aware of God's absolute transcendence, of the utter power of God, which knows no limits but those which are self-imposed. And he must become aware of God's absolute love of man, of the inalienable bond to which God has committed Himself. More broadly, he must contemplate the types of fear of God and the types of love of God. He must meditate on the essential contingency of all reality upon God—that nothing exceeds God's knowledge, power, and providence. And he must ponder the acts and the Person of God as reflected in the traditional texts. More broadly still, such a person must confront his own real fear of God and his own real love of God. He must confront the reality of his relatedness to God. And then he must consciously broaden his awareness to let the presence of God into his mind and heart. He must consciously broaden his awareness to let the presence of God into his mind and heart. He must consciously broaden his awareness to permit himself to stand in the presence of God—person to Person, presence to Presence. At the outer limits of this mode of *Kavvana*, the praying rabbinic Jew must, in his own awareness, be ready to die, in that moment. He must be ready to immediately cast himself into the abyss. He must be completely ready to give up his soul for God, for His Truth, for His Torah, for His people. And then he must say what he has to say, for whom he has to say it. Then, and only then, the rabbinic Jew may, and indeed must, pray.

Not everyone can achieve or sustain such a broad spectrum of consciousness—in all its modes and levels—but in its full scope (and there is undoubtedly part that I, in my ignorance, have omitted), *Kavvana* is the key to the range of traditional religious reality, to Jewish piety.

## QUESTIONS

1. Blumenthal divided the different kinds of *kavvana* into four rough "modes," devoting one paragraph to the various levels within each

mode. Below are four possible definitions of *kavvana*. Which of these definitions would best serve as labels for which modes of *kavvana*?

- a. Knowing that One Stands before God<sup>1</sup>
  - b. Connectedness to the Prayers of Others
  - c. Depth of Need
  - d. Depth of Textual Awareness and Understanding
2. Of these four "modes" of *kavvana*, which are closest to the simple and direct meaning of the words one actually says in the *Amida* and other rabbinic prayers? How and why?
  3. In Part Two of this book, we outlined several schools of thought on the nature and purpose of Jewish prayer and the meaning of *kavvana*. How do Blumenthal's "modes" and "levels" of *kavvana* correspond to those various outlooks?
  4. Blumenthal chose a prescribed prayer text for his example, a verse from the psalms (from *Hallel*). He found an astonishing number of ways to approach that one verse, all of which may legitimately be called "*kavvana*." But how might his ideas apply if they were applied to prayers without fixed words such as these:
    - a) A free, informal prayer of a mother for the safety and health of her children.
    - b) A rabbinic prayer of the type described in chapter four, for which the *themes* are predetermined but the *words* are left up to the one who says it. Consider, for example, the blessing about love (*Ahavat Olam/Ahava Rabba*) said before *Shema*, or the blessings of thanks (*Modim*) and for peace (*Sim Shalom/Shalom Rav*) in the *Amida*.
  5. Despite his awareness of the wide range of meaning inherent in *kavvana*, Blumenthal did not hesitate to define the word. He called *kavvana* "a consciousness-raising technique" or "a technique for broadening one's awareness of what one is doing." In particular, he hinted at the very beginning of his essay that *kavvana* implies *multiple-consciousness* when reciting a fixed prayer.  
 However, in a prayer where the person praying supplies his *own* words and reaches a deep level of *kavvana*, would it still be necessary (or correct) to describe his experience as "multiple" consciousness? Why or why not?
  6. Moshe Greenberg wrote the following about biblical prayer: "The idea that the essence of prayer is the conformity of speech with thought surely reflects a refined spirituality" (*Biblical Prose Prayer*, p. 51). How do Greenberg and Blumenthal understand *kavvana* in fundamentally different ways?

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1. This was one of Rabbi Hayyim Soloveitchik's definitions; see chapter two.



## Glossary of Hebrew Terms, Rabbinic Authorities and Works

**T**his Glossary is for Hebrew terms occurring more than once in the main text of the book, or in the notes at the end of each chapter. It is not intended for technical words or terms that are used in just one context and immediately explained where they occur.

The Glossary also includes the names of prominent rabbinic authorities and works that are frequently referred to in the text and the notes. For rabbinic authorities, the entry usually stresses the particular works by that personality consulted in the book, often ignoring others (e.g. commentaries on *Berakhot* will often be mentioned, even if there are also commentaries on other tractates by the same author). When an acronym is frequently used for a rabbinic authority in this book, the main entry is usually found under the acronym. The Glossary does not include modern secondary literature, whether rabbinic or academic.

**Rabbi Abraham ben ha-Rambam** (Egypt, d. 1287), Rambam's son. Halakhist who continued his father's communal leadership in Egypt. Of his works, numerous responsa, part of an Arabic ethical tract entitled *Ha-Maspik le-Ovdei Hashem*, and some biblical commentaries survive.

**Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra** (early to mid-twelfth century), biblical exegete, philosopher, and poet. In his latter role, he criticized the *piyyutim* of many of his predecessors.

**Rabbi Don Isaac Abravanel** (1437–1508). Biblical commentator and philosopher. Served as advisor to several European kings, leaving Spain with his brethren when they were expelled from that country in 1492. His philosophic work *Rosh Amana* has a major place in the medieval discussion of the principles of Judaism.

**Rabbi David Abudarham** (thirteenth-fourteenth centuries). Wrote, in 1340, what seems to be the first full-fledged commentary on the siddur (simply called *Abudarham*).

**Rabbi Abraham Abulafia** (thirteenth century). Author of numerous kabbalistic and eschatological works, including *Sodot ha-Moreh*, a kabbalistic commentary on Rambam's *Moreh ha-Nevukhim*. His messianic predictions aroused fierce controversy.

**aggada** (plural: *aggadot*). Rabbinic legends, especially those found in the Talmud. Also: non-legal material, used in contrast to "halakha."

**aharonim**. The "late" authorities, used in contrast to *rishonim*. In halakhic discourse, this usually refers to rabbinic works appearing in the era roughly beginning with the fifteenth century, or the expulsion of the Jews from Spain (1492), or the appearance of the *Shulhan Arukh* (1555).

**ahavat Hashem**, love of God.

**Akeda**, the binding of Isaac. For prayer, the term refers to the biblical passage that tells this story plus related short prayers, printed in *siddurim* towards the beginning of the morning service.

**Akedat Yitzhak**, see Rabbi Yitzhak Arama.

**`al ha-aretz**, "For the Land." The second blessing in the Grace after meals.

**Rabbi Yosef Albo** (Spain, d. after 1433). Finished writing *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* on the principles of Judaism in 1425. Also participated in the forced public disputation with Christian clerics at Tortosa and San Mateo in 1413–14.

**Alenu**, prayer found in *musaf* of Rosh Hashana. It later became the custom to say it at the end of each of the three daily prayers.

**`aliya**, to "go up" to the Land of Israel and settle there.

**Amida**, the collection of blessings which constitute the rabbinic obligation for *tefilla*. *Amida* literally means "standing," because it is said while standing.

**Amoraim**, rabbinic scholars beginning after the completion of the Mishna, in Babylon and in the Land of Israel, whose opinions are recorded in the two Talmuds (*Bavli* and *Yerushalmi*).

**Anshei Keneset ha-Gedolah**. Rabbinic term for a group of scholars sometime during the beginning of the Second Temple era. Some talmudic passages indicate they were responsible for "instituting" blessings and prayers.

**Rabbi Yitzhak Aramah** (Spain [until the expulsion], 1420–1494). Author of a philosophical commentary on the Bible called *Akedat Yitzkah*.

**Ari**, see Rabbi Isaac Luria.

**Arukh ha-Shulhan**, halakhic work by Rabbi Yehiel Mikhel Epstein (d. 1908), following the order of the *Shulhan Arukh* and citing the important halakhic literature from before and after it on each topic.

**arvit**, the evening prayer, also called *ma'ariv*.

**asham**, a guilt-offering.

**Rabbi Yosef Ashkenazi** (Safed, 1525–1577). Kabbalist, critic of rational philosophy, and editor of a corrected text of the Mishna.

**ashkenazim**, Jews of Franco-Germany in the middle ages, and most of Europe during later times.

**Ashrei**, psalm 145 plus introductory and concluding verses. Found twice in the morning prayer and once in the afternoon prayer.

**avoda**, service or work.

**avodat Hashem**, serving God.

**avoda sheba-lev**, service of (or “in”) the heart.

**Avoda Zara**, talmudic tractate.

**Avot**, “Fathers,” first blessing of the *Amida*. Also: *Mishnaic* tractate.

**Rabbi Hayyim Yosef David Azulai** (1724–1806). Known by his initials as “Hida.” Prolific Sephardic halakhist and kabbalist.

**ba'al ha-bayit**, head of the household.

**ba'al tefilla** (plural: *ba'alei tefilla*). A person well versed in leading public prayer.

**ba'alei ha-tosafot**, added explanations (*tosafot*) of the Talmud, mostly by French and German scholars, including some grandsons of Rashi. There are numerous versions of these *tosafot* commentaries by different scholars.

**Babli**, see *Bavli*.

**Bah**, *Bayit Hadash*, commentary on the *Tur* by Rabbi Yoel Sirkes (Poland, 1561–1640).

**Rabbenu Bahya ibn Pakuda** (eleventh century Spain), author of the philosophical and ethical treatise *Hovot ha-Levavot*.

**bakkasha** (plural: *bakkashot*), petition (especially as found in the thirteen middle blessings of the weekday *Amida*).

**baraita** (plural: *baraitot*), a statement by the *tannaim* not included in the Mishna.

**barukh**, Blessed.

**barukh atta Hashem**, “Blessed are You, Lord,” the formula at the beginning of a typical halakhic blessing.

**Barukh she-Amar**, “Blessed is He Who Spoke . . .,” the blessing introducing *pesukei de-zimra*.

**barukh shem**, the verse inserted after the first verse of *Shema*.

**Bava Batra**, talmudic tractate.



**Bava Kama**, talmudic tractate.

**Bava Metzia**, talmudic tractate.

**Bavli**, the "Babylonian" Talmud.

**bedi'avad**, "when it is done," technical term for an action fulfilling a halakhic obligation, but not done fully or correctly. Also: a non-ideal state, or a compromise with reality. Used in contrast to *le-khatehilla*.

**Beit Elokim**, see *Mabit*.

**Beit ha-Behira**, see *Meiri*.

**beit midrash** (or: *beit ha-midrash*), house of study.

**Beit Yosef**, commentary on the *Tur* by Rabbi Yosef Karo.

**ben**, son of.

**berakha**, blessing.

**Berakha Meshuleshet**, "Triple Blessing," title for collections of three commentaries on the talmudic tractate *Berakhot*. Several editions exist, with different selections of commentaries.

**Berakhot**, talmudic tractate. Also see *Yerushalmi Berakhot*.

**Bereshit Rabba**, early midrash on Genesis.

**berit ve-Torah**, "covenant and law," a phrase in the Grace after meals about which there is halakhic discussion.

**birkat ha-mazon**, the Grace after Meals.

**birkat ha-minim**, the blessing against heretics; the "nineteenth" blessing of the *Amida*, it was instituted after the original eighteen.

**Birkat ha-Shanim**, "Blessing of the Years"; blessing in the *Amida* petitioning for material bounty, especially for a productive agricultural year in the climate of the Land of Israel.

**birkat kohanim**, see *kohen*.

**birkhot ha-nehenin**, blessing over things of "pleasure," especially foods and smells.

**birkhot kerī'at Shema**, the blessing before and after the recitation of *Shema*.

**bitahon**, loyal trust.

**bitahon ba-shem**, loyal trust in God, and reliance on Him.

**bittul ha-yesh**, Self-nullification, a hasidic/kabbalistic doctrine.

**Biur Halakha**, see *Mishna Berura*.

**Biur ha-Gra**, see Vilna Gaon.

**bnei yeshiva**, yeshiva students.

**Boneh Yerushalayim**, "Who Build Jerusalem," the third blessing in the Grace after Meals.

**Chesed**, kindness. Also name of one of the kabbalistic *sefirot*.

**cholent**, Yiddish word for a stew eaten at the Shabbat noon meal, cooked from before Shabbat began because it is forbidden to start cooking food on Shabbat.

**Commentary on the Mishna**, see Rambam.

**Rabbi Hasdai Crescas** (Spain, d. 1412). Philosopher and anti-Christian polemicist. His major philosophic work is *Or Hashem*.

**dagesh hazak**, masoretic punctuation mark indicating that a Hebrew consonant is to be lengthened.

**Rabbi Abaraham Danzig** (1748–1820), author of the halakhic summaries *Hayyei Adam* on *Orah Hayyim* and *Hokhmat Adam* on *Even ha-Ezer*.

**da'at yahid**, a "lone" opinion, held by only one halakhic authority.

**davven**, Yiddish for "pray."

**derashot**, rabbinic sermons.

**derekh erez**, a fine, decent, civilized, or noble way of acting (also in Yiddish).

**Derisha**, part of *Beit Yisrael*, commentary on the *Tur* by Rabbi Joshua Falk Katz (Poland, d. 1614).

**devar issur**, something formally prohibited by the halakha.

**devar Torah**, a short oral presentation on a topic in the Torah.

**devekut**, hasidic doctrine of "clinging" to God.

**dibbera Torah kilshon benei adam**, "The Torah speaks in human language."

**din torah**, a rabbinic trial (or the summons to one).

**Divrei Hayyim**, collection of responsa by the hasidic *rebbe* and halakhist Rabbi Hayyim Halberstam of Tzanz (d. 1876).

**dohak**, a "forced" or difficult interpretation of a rabbinic text.

**Edot ha-Mizrah**, Jews of the "eastern communities," commonly called Sephardim.

**ehad**, one.

**ein lekha bo ela hiddusho**, the idea that one may only take a halakhic ruling as far as it explicitly states when it operates against a general rule.

**Eleh Divrei ha-Berit**, nineteenth century compendium of Orthodox polemic against Reform innovations regarding prayer and the synagogue.

**Elokai Netzor**, talmudic prayer incorporated into the siddur after the *Amida*.

**elu ve-elu be-fetzah mefatzehim**, "They all shout with gladness"—a rough equivalent of the kind verses found in the Rosh Hashana *piyyut* known as *Hashem Melekh*.

**Rabbi Ya'akov Emden** (also known by his acronym *Ya'avetz*, 1697–1776). Halakhist, kabbalist, and anti-Sabbatean polemicist. The edition of the siddur with his commentaries is entitled *Siddur Beit Ya'akov*, with an important introduction called *Sulam Beit El*. His *Migdal Oz* contains essays on ethics and some bibliographical comments.

**Emet ve-Yatziv**, "True and Sure," the blessing following *Shema* in the morning.

**Emet ve-Emunah**, "True and dependable," the blessing following *Shema* in the evening.

**emunah peshuta**, simple faith.

**Emunot ve-De'ot**, see Saadya Gaon.

**Eruvin**, talmudic tractate.

**Eshel Avraham**, see *Peri Megadim*.

**eved**, slave or loyal servant.

**Exodus Rabba**, late midrash on the book of Exodus.

**Rabbi Moshe Feinstein** (1895–1986). The most influential *posek* in the United States. His collection of responsa is called *Iggerot Moshe*.

**ga'al yisrael**, "Who Redeems Israel," final blessing after *Shema*.

**gam zu le-tova**, "This, too, is for the best."

**gedolei Yisrael**, "The Great Men of Israel," the most influential rabbinic leaders, thinkers, and *posekim*.

**gedolei `olam**, the greatest scholars in history, or in the world.

**gemara**, analysis of the Mishna (and other material, such as *aggadot*) by the *amoraim*. The Mishna together with the gemara compiled in the Land of Israel is known as the *Talmud Yerushalmi*, while the Mishna plus the gemara compiled in Babylon is known as the *Talmud Bavli*.

**Geonim**, heads of the Babylonian *yeshivot*, roughly from the sixth to eleventh centuries.

**Gevurah**, "Might," the rabbinic name for the second blessing of the *Amida*.

**Gevurot Geshamim**, "the might of the rains." The rabbinic name for a praise of God ("*mashiv ha-ru'ah* . . .") included during the rainy season.

**Ha'amek Davar**, see *Netziv*.

**Hagahot Ashri**, halakhic notes on the *Rosh* by Rabbi Yisrael of Krems (fourteenth century).

**Hagahot Maimoniyot**, halakhic remarks on Rambam's *Mishneh Torah* based on Ashkenazic practices, compiled by Rabbi Meir ha-Kohen (fourteenth century).

**hakarat ha-tov**, gratitude.

**Ha-Ketav vecha-Kabbala**, see Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenborg.

**hakhamim**, scholars. Especially used to refer to the majority opinion of the rabbis of the Mishna.

**Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu**, The Holy One, Blessed is He.

**halakha** (plural: *halakhot*), Jewish law.

**Rabbi Yehuda Halevi** (d. c. 1141), poet and philosopher. Eight hundred of his poems, including about 350 religious *piyyutim*, are known today. His philosophical work is the *Kuzari*.

**hallel**, "Praise," especially the collection of psalms said on major holidays.

**ha-ma'arikh bitfillato**, one who is lengthy in his prayers.

**ha-motzi**, "Who Brings Forth [Bread]," the blessing said before eating bread.

**Rabbi Nathan Natta Hannover** (d. 1683), chronicler of the Ukrainian massacres of the Jews in the mid-seventeenth century and author/compiler of *Sha'arei Tziyyon*, which includes many original prayers.

**Rabbenu Hannanel** (d. 1055), author of an early commentary on the Talmud. Parts of his commentary to tractate *Berakhot* survive.

**harahaman**, "The Merciful One . . .," the form typical of customary petitions after the Grace after Meals.

**Hashem**, "the Name," used in place of the Hebrew names of God in ordinary discourse.

**hashgaha**, God's providence over the fate of men.

**hashkafa** (plural: *hashkafot*), an overall philosophy, a system of thinking, or an approach to life.

**hashkivenu**, "Let us lie down [in peace] . . .," the second blessing said after *Shema* at night.

**hasid** (plural: *hasidim*), a pious man. Also the term used for followers of the movement begun by the Baal Shem Tov (1700–1760), which is known as *hasidut*.

**Hasidei Ashkenaz**, a small group of German scholars in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, who were distinguished by their ascetic practices, mystical outlook, and gentle attitude towards common Jews.

**Hatam Sofer**, responsa by Rabbi Moses Sofer (1762–1839).

**hatima**, the “closure” of a long blessing, including the words “*Barukh atta Hashem . . .*”

**havdalot**, blessings about “separation,” such as at the end of Shabbat.

**Hayyei Adam**, see Rabbi Abraham Danzig.

**Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin** (1745–1821), main student of the Vilna Gaon, founder of the influential yeshiva of Volozhin. Author of *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*, a treatise on the importance of Torah study, partly in response to *hasidut*. Part two of *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* is on prayer.

**Hazal**, acronym for *Hakhameinu Zikhronam Livrakha*, “our sages of blessed memory.” Usually used to refer to the rabbis of the Talmud.

**hazarat ha-shatz**, the repetition of the *Amida* by the *sheli’ah tzibbur*.

**Hazon Ish**, responsa on *Orah Hayyim* by Rabbi Avraham Karelitz (1878–1953), one of the most influential *posekim* in the twentieth century. Also the title of his critique of Rav Hayyim Soloveitchik’s *Hiddushim* on the Rambam.

**hazzan** (plural: *hazzanim*), one who leads the prayers, especially with recitation of *piyyutim* (in the middle ages) or intricate musical accompaniment (today). The practice or profession is called *hazzanut*.

**Rabbi Yom Tov Lipmann Heller** (1579–1654), author of commentary *Tosafot Yom Tov* on the Mishna.

**hiddushei Torah**, new expert ideas, usually on halakhic topics, by *talmidei hakhamim*.

**hiddush** (plural: *hiddushim*), something fresh or new, especially as in a spontaneous prayer or personal expression within the halakhic prayers. Also: new commentaries on talmudic tractates are called *Hiddushim*.

**Hiddushei ha-Rashba**, see Rashba.

**Hiddushei ha-Ritva**, see Ritva.

**Hilkhot Keriat Shema**, Laws of Reading the *Shema*, section of Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah*.

**Hilkhot Matenot Aniyyim**, Laws of Gifts to the Poor, section of Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah*.

**Hilkhot Melakhim**, Laws of Kings, section of Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah*.

**Hilkhot Mehira**, Laws of Sale, section of Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*.

**Hilkhot Tefilla**, Laws of Prayer, section of Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*.

**Hilkhot Teshuva**, Laws of Repentance, section of Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*.

**hillul Hashem**, a desecration of God's name. An act that reflects poorly on the nation of Israel or on those who keep God's Torah.

**hinnukh**, education.

**hinnukh dati**, the official "stream" of public religious education in the State of Israel.

**Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch** (1808–1888), promoter of German Orthodoxy and opponent of Reform. Author of numerous commentaries and ideological works including commentaries on the Torah and the siddur, and the religious treatise *Horeb*.

**hithannen**, to seek favor for oneself, usually in a plea to God.

**hitpallel** (also: *le-hitpallel*), to pray.

**Hoda'ah**, rabbinic title for the blessing of thanks in the *Amida* beginning with the word "*Modim*."

**Hodu**, first word in a collection of verses said early in the morning prayer, either before or during *pesukei de-zimra* depending on the custom.

**hora'at sha'ah**, a temporary "emergency" decree without a strict basis in the halakha.

**Horayot**, talmudic tractate.

**Horeb**, see Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch.

**Hovat ha-Talmidim**, see Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira.

**Hovot ha-Levavot**, see Rabbenu Bahya ibn Pakuda.

**humra**, a strict halakhic opinion, or a stringency going beyond what the halakha actually requires.

**humra de-atya lidei kula**, a case where a strict decree or ruling on a certain matter will have the practical result of people failing to honor other, more basic halakhic rules.

**huppa**, the wedding canopy.

**Iggerot Moshe**, see Rabbi Moshe Feinstein.

**Iggerot ha-Rambam**, collections of Rambam's replies to hundreds of halakhic queries from around the world.

**inyan** (plural: *inyanim*). A certain matter or topic. Specifically, an idea brought up in the context of a blessing.

**Rabbi Israel ben Petahia Isserlein** (d. 1460). Author of responsa *Terumat ha-Deshen*.

**iyyun *tefilla***, taking care about prayer.

**Iyyun *Tefilla***, see Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenborg.

**kabbala**, tradition, that which is received. Most often used to refer to the entire Jewish mystical tradition.

**kabbalat ha-*tefilla***, acceptance of prayer by God.

**Kabbalat Shabbat**, psalms and songs welcoming Shabbat.

**kaddish** (plural: *kaddeshim*). Aramaic prayer of praise said at the conclusion of each major section of the fixed prayers. Also said by mourners.

**Rabbi Yosef Karo** (1488–1574). Halakhist and Kabbalist. Author of commentaries *Kesef Mishna* on Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*, and *Beit Yosef* on the *Tur*. The *Shulhan Arukh*, his halakhic code, follows the order of the four parts of the *Tur*. In Ashkenazic halakhic discourse, he is often referred to as the *Mehaber* ("author" of the *Shulhan Arukh*), while Sephardim refer to him as *Maran* ("our master").

***kavvana*** (plural: *kavvanot*), directing [the heart]. In general: to have conscious "intent" for performing a mitzva. For prayer: sincerity; "meaning"; concentration. The plural is usually associated with kabbalistic interpretations.

**kavvanat ha-lev**, directing the heart (see *kavvana*).

**kedusha**, holiness.

**kedusha**, rabbinic term for the third blessing of the *Amida*.

**kedushat ha-zeman**, holiness or sanctity of time.

**kedushot**, blessings dealing with sanctity, presumably sanctified times.

**Kelal Yisrael**, the "whole" nation of Israel.

**Keneset Yisrael**, the "congregation" or "community" of Israel.

**keri'at Shema**, reading of the *Shema*.

**keri'at ha-Torah**, reading of the Torah.

**Kesef Mishna**, see Rabbi Yosef Karo.

**keva**, something unchanging or fixed in place. Also used, by extension, for rote recitation of prayers.

**kiddush Hashem**, a sanctification of God's name. An act which reflects well of the nation of Israel or on those who keep God's Torah. Also: to die as a martyr.

**Kiddushin**, talmudic tractate.

**kohen** (plural: *kohanim*), a descendant of Aaron with special rights and responsibilities, especially regarding the Temple. One of these, still done today, is to say *birkat kohanim*, the special words with which the *kohanim* bless the people in God's name.

**kol**, "all" or "voice."

**Kol Nidrei**, renunciation of vows at the beginning of Yom Kippur.

**korbanot**, sacrifices.

**kotel**, the Western Wall of the Temple Mount built by Herod.

**Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kuk** (1865–1935), one of the most outstanding and prolific halakhists and thinkers in the twentieth century, also an energetic communal leader and a poet. His ideas continue to have a powerful effect on the form and success of religious Zionism. His commentary on the *siddur* is called *Olat Re'iyah*.

**Kuzari**, see Rabbi Yehuda Halevi.

**Rabbi Yehezkel Halevi Landau** (Poland, 1713–1793). Author of responsa *Noda Bihuda* and commentary *Tzelah* (acronym for *Tziyyun le-Nefesh Haya*) on several tractates including *Berakhot*.

**lashon ha-kodesh**, the Holy Tongue, Hebrew.

**lashon tahanunim**, the language of pleading, humble language.

**Laws of Blessings**, section of Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*.

**Laws of Prayer**, section of Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*.

**Laws of Repentance**, section of Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*.

**Laws of [Reading the] Shema**, section of Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*.

**lehaddesh bah/bo davar**, "to say something new in it," especially to add a personal petition in the middle blessings of the *Amida*.

**Lehem Mishna**, commentary on Rambam's *Mishneh Torah* by Rabbi Avraham Hiyya ben Moshe Botton (1545–1588).

**le-hitpallel**, see *hitpallel*.

**le-khatehilla**, "as in the first place," the way a mitzva should best be performed at the outset. Used in contrast to *bedi'avad*.

**lev**, heart or sincerity.

**Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev** (1740–1809), hasidic *rebbe* famed for his overwhelming love of the Jewish people. Author of *Kedushat Levi*.

**Levush(im)**, subdivision(s) of *Levush Malkhut* by Rabbi Mordecai Yaffe (sixteenth century), a halakhic code arranged parallel to major sections of the *Tur*.



**Rabbi Yehuda Loew**, the Maharal of Prague (1525–1609). Prolific author mostly concerned with a unique symbolic system to interpret rabbinic *aggadot*. *Netiv ha-Torah* on Torah study and *Netiv ha-Avoda* on prayer are the first two parts of his *Netivot Olam*.

**Likkutei He'arot**, encyclopedic collection of halakhic material relating to responsa *Hatam Sofer*.

**Likkutei Tefillot**, see Rabbi Nahman of Breslov.

**Rabbi Isaac Luria** (the "Ari," 1534–1572), probably the greatest single figure in the kabbalistic tradition, whose ideas continue to have a strong impact on popular beliefs, especially through the medium of *hasidut*, which adapted and popularized his ideas. The Ari is responsible for the idea that complicated *kavvanot* are associated with every small detail in the siddur, and his teachings ultimately had wide ramifications for the text (*nosah*) of the siddur itself.

**Rabbi Samuel David Luzzato**, see Shadal.

**Ma'amadot**, formal communal representation for Temple sacrifices, and associated recitation.

**ma'ariv**, the evening prayer.

**Mabit**, Rabbi Moshe ben Yosef of Trani (sixteenth century). Outstanding halakhist who also wrote *Beit Elokim*, a spiritual guide including *Sha'ar ha-Tefilla* on prayer.

**Magen Avraham**, commentary on *Orah Hayyim* by Rabbi Avraham Gombiner (Poland, 1637–1683).

**Maggid of Mezhirech**, Rabbi Dov Ber (eighteenth century). Major student and successor of the Baal Shem Tov (see *hasid*). Author of *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'akov*, and strong opponent of simple prayer for human needs.

**Maggid Devarav le-Ya'akov**, see Maggid of Mezhirech.

**Maharal of Prague**, see Rabbi Yehuda Loew.

**Maharam** (of Rothenberg, d. 1293), influential Ashkenazic Talmudist and halakhist whose opinions and customs are widely cited by those who followed him. Collections of his *tosafot*, his halakhic manuals, and his responsa are in print.

**mahloket**, disagreement, quarrel.

**Mahzor Vitry**, halakhic compendium on prayer and holidays, by Rabbi Simha of Vitry (d. 1105), a disciple of Rashi. One of the earliest *siddurim*.

**Malbim**, Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Mikhel (1809–1879), his commentary on the Bible is known by his acronym.

**Masoretes**, scholars who created written systems to record ancient traditions of pronunciation for the biblical text, and took care to transmit that

text exactly, down to individual Hebrew letters and grammatical signs. Until about the tenth century.

**matbea`**, the overall structure mandated by the halakha for a blessing, or perhaps even its very text.

**matir**, basis for halakhic permission.

**me`en ha-berakha**, corresponding to the theme of a blessing.

**Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenborg** (1785–1865), author of commentaries *Ha-Ketav ve-ha-Kabbala* on the Torah and *Iyyun Tefilla* on the siddur.

**Megilla**, talmudic tractate.

**Mehaber**, see Rabbi Yosef Karo.

**me-ikkar ha-din**, according to the halakhic principle (as opposed to its practical application).

**Rabbi Meir (Maharam) of Rothenburg**, see Maharam.

**Rabbi Meir Simha of Dvinsk** (1843–1926), hasidic *rebbe*. Author of commentaries *Or Same'ah* on Rambam's *Mishneh Torah* and *Meshekh Hokhma* on the Torah.

**Meiri**, Rabbi Menahem (Provence, 1249–1306). Author of *Beit ha-Behira*, a summary, guide, and commentary to the Talmud.

**mekubbal** (plural: *mekubbalim*), an expert in the kabbala (a kabbalist).

**Melekheth Shelomo**, commentary on the Mishna by Rabbi Shelomo Adani (1567–1625).

**mentsch**, Yiddish for a person with sterling character traits and a noble way of life.

**mentschlikhtkeit**, Yiddish for qualities and conduct exhibited by a *mentsch*.

**Meshekh Hokhma**, see Rabbi Meir Simha of Dvinsk.

**mezuzah**, a handwritten parchment containing the first two paragraphs of *Shema*, attached to a doorpost.

**midda** (plural: *middot*), a character trait.

**midda ra'ah**, a poor character trait.

**midrash**, a rabbinic interpretation of the biblical text going beyond its plain (*peshat*) meaning. Alternatively: a collection of midrashim.

**Migdal `Oz (Beit Middot)**, see Rabbi Yaakov Emden.

**minha**, the afternoon prayer.

**minhag** (plural: *minhagim*), custom.

**minhag Yisrael**, the custom of all Israel; a prevalent custom or way of acting.

**Minhat Bikkurim**, commentary of the *Tosefta* by Rabbi Shemuel Avigdor of Karlin, included in the standard Vilna edition of the Talmud.

**minyan** (plural: *minyanim*), a group of at least ten Jewish men, needed for prayer to be considered public (*tefilla be-tzibbur*).

**mi she-berakh**, "He who blesses," the typical formula used to bless those called to the Torah.

**Mishna**, the authoritative compendium of rabbinic halakhic traditions redacted by Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi (c. 200). The *Mishna* together with the *gemara* are called the Talmud.

**Mishna Berakhot**, mishnaic tractate *Berakhot* (not including the *gemara*).

**Mishna Berura**, commentary on *Orah Hayyim* by Rabbi Israel Meir ha-Kohen Kagan (1838–1933, known as the *Hafetz Hayyim*). Includes in-depth analyses under the title *Biur Halakha* and references under *Sha'ar ha-Tziyyun*.

**Mishneh Torah**, see Rambam.

**mit'assek**, halakhic term for unwitting performance of a mitzva with no conscious intention and no implied intention. Such an act cannot fulfil a halakhic requirement.

**mitnaggedim**, the "opponents" of the hasidic movement that began in eastern Europe during the eighteenth century.

**mitpallel** (plural: *mitpallelim*), a person who prays.

**mitzva** (plural: *mitzvot*), a commandment by the Torah; a good deed.

**mitzva de-oraita**, a commandment required by the Torah (including its rabbinic halakhic interpretation). As opposed to *mitzva de-rabbanan*, a requirement instituted by rabbinic authority alone.

**mizmor**, (plural: *mizmorim*), a psalm.

**Mizmor Shir Hanukkat ha-Bayit**, psalm 30, included towards the beginning of the morning prayer.

**Modim**, "We are grateful," blessing of thanks near the end of the *Amida*. Same as *Hoda'ah*.

**Modim de-Rabbanan**, another version of *Modim*, nowadays said by the congregation during *hazarat ha-shatz*.

**Mordecai**, collection of halakhic decisions by Franco-German halakhists, following the order of the Talmud. Collected by Rabbi Mordecai ben Hillel of Nuremberg (d. 1298 as a martyr).

**Moreh ha-Nevukhim**, see Rambam.

**musaf**, the additional prayer on holidays, corresponding to the additional sacrifices that were offered in the Temple on those days.

**musar**, ethical teaching or advice. Also: books of this genre are called *sifrei musar*.

**Rabbi Nahman of Breslov** (d. 1810). Hasidic *rebbe*; the only *rebbe* of the Breslover hasidim. Strong supporter of talking freely to God in a person's own words. Hundreds of original prayers based on ideas from his teachings are found in *Likkutei Tefillot*.

**nefesh**, "self" or "soul" or "life-force."

**Nefesh ha-Hayyim**, see Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin.

**nefillat apayim**, "falling on the face" (i.e., bowing), halakhic term for what is usually called *Tahanun*.

**Neshamah**, in much hasidic literature: the intellect.

**Netiv ha-Avoda**, see Rabbi Yehuda Leow.

**Netiv ha-Torah**, see Rabbi Yehuda Leow.

**Netivot `Olam**, see Rabbi Yehuda Leow.

**Netziv**, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (Russia, 1817–1893). Head of the yeshiva of Volozhin, halakhist, exegete. *Ha'amek Davar* is his commentary on the Torah.

**Niddah**, talmudic tractate.

**Noda Bihuda**, see Rabbi Yehezkel Halevi Landau.

**nosah** (equivalent to *nusah* and *nosha*; plural: *nosahim* or *nosha'ot*). A given text, fixed in writing or by an oral tradition that is memorized. The term is Hebrew, not to be confused with Yiddish *nusach*.

**Nosah ha-Arizal**, the edition of the siddur by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady (1747–1813), the first *rebbe* of the Habad hasidim. One version of *nosah Sefarad*.

**Nosah ha-Gra**, Ashkenazic prayer-text based on the rulings of the Vilna Gaon.

**Nosah Sefarad**, various editions of the Ashkenazic siddur changing its order and altering its text to make it better conform with the Sephardic siddur on which the Ari based his *kavvanot*.

**nosah she-tikkenu anshei kneset ha-gedolah**. "the prayer text instituted by the Men of the Great Assembly." Used only in late halakhic literature with the word *nosah*.

**nuksheh**, hard, stubborn or unchanging.

**nusach**, Yiddish for the basic melody of prayer for at demarcated times: e.g. the *nusach* for weekday prayer, the *nusach* for Shabbat prayer, etc.

**Or Hashem**, see Rabbi Hasdai Crescas.

**Orah Hayyim**, first of the four parts of the *Tur* (and by extension of the *Shulhan Arukh*, which follows the *Tur*'s order). Deals with daily mitzvot including prayer, laws of Shabbat and holidays.

**Orhot Tzaddikim**, anonymous medieval ethical tract.

**Otzar ha-Geonim**, collection of geonic commentary on the Talmud.

**parnasa**, a livelihood; job with a livable salary.

**payyetan** (plural: *payyetanim*), liturgical poet.

**Peri Megadim**, supercommentary on *Orah Hayyim* by Rabbi Yosef Teomim (1727–1792). Includes *Eshel Avraham* on *Magen Avraham* and *Mishbetzot Zahav* on *Taz*.

**perush**, meaning or commentary.

**perush ha-millim**, the meaning of the words.

**perush ha-millot**, the meaning of the words (this form often used in halakhic texts).

**Perush ha-Rashbetz `al Berakhot**, see *Rashbetz*.

**Pesahim**, talmudic tractate.

**pesak**, authoritative halakhic ruling.

**pesukei de-zimra**, “verses of song,” early part of the morning prayer.

**petiha**, the “opening” part of a long blessing with the formula “*Barukh Atta . . .*”

**Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer**, midrashic collection.

**piyyut** (plural: *piyyutim*), liturgical poems.

**Pnei Yehoshua**, commentary on the Talmud by Rabbi Yaakov Yehoshua Falk.

**posek** (plural: *posekim*), scholar rendering authoritative halakhic decisions.

**Ra'avad**, Rabbi Abraham ben David (Provence, twelfth century). His critical notes on Rambam's *Mishneh Torah* (usually disagreeing with it) are called the *Hasagot* of the *Ra'avad*.

**rabbanim**, rabbis.

**Rabbenu Tam**, Rabbi Yaakov ben Meir (France, d. 1171), a grandson of Rashi. One of the most influential tosafists and French halakhists (also a grammarian). His views are very often cited in the *tosafot* by name.

**Rabbenu Yonah** (of Gerona, Spain, d. 1263). Wrote a commentary on the *Rif* on *Berakhot*, and the treatise on repentance called *Sha'arei Teshuva*.

**Radak**, Rabbi David Kimhi (Provence, 1160–1236), one of the greatest Hebrew grammarians and biblical commentators of the middle ages. His commentaries on the Bible are known by his acronym; his biblical dictionary is called *Sefer ha-Shorashim*.

**Radbaz**, Rabbi David Ibn Zimra (1480–1573). Halakhist whose prolific writings include many hundreds of responsa.

**rahamei**, Aramaic of the Talmud for prayer.

**rahamim**, mercy.

**Rambam**, Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (or Maimonides, 1135–1204). The single most influential figure among both halakhists and rational philosophers in the Jewish Middle Ages. He was also a physician. His halakhic works include his Commentary on the Mishna (*Perush ha-Mishnayot*), *Sefer ha-Mitzot* (halakhic delineation of the 613 mitzvot), *Mishneh Torah* (systematic arrangement of talmudic law, also called the *Yad ha-Hazaka*), and hundreds of responsa. His main philosophic work is *Moreh ha-Nevukhim* (The Guide to the Perplexed), which tries to reconcile rabbinic Judaism with Aristotelian philosophy. Rambam wrote all these works in Judeo-Arabic aside from *Mishneh Torah* and some of the responsa, which are in Hebrew.

**Ramban**, Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman (or Nahmanides, 1194–1270). Exegete, halakhist, and kabbalist. His halakhic writings include critical comments on Rambam's *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*.

**Ran**, Rabbenu Nissim (Spain, fourteenth century). Talmudist and rational philosopher. Wrote a commentary on the *Rif's Halakhot*, *Hiddushim* on talmudic tractates, and philosophic *Derashot*.

**Rashba**, Rabbi Shelomo ben Avraham ibn Adret (Spain, 1235–1310). Halakhist who authored hundreds of responsa and *Hiddushim* on the Talmud, plus other halakhic manuals.

**Rashbetz**, Rabbi Shimon ben Tzemah Duran (1361–1444), halakhist, exegete and philosopher. Among his halakhic works are hundreds of responsa and a commentary on *Berakhot*.

**Rashi**, Rabbi Shelomo Yitzhaki (1040–1105). Author of the most influential medieval commentaries on the Bible and Talmud. Rashi's commentary on the *Talmud Bavli* helped open that book to Ashkenazic Jewry, and it has remained the basic commentary on the Talmud for all Israel to this day. His commentary on the Torah became the starting point for almost all subsequent Jewish exegesis, both for those who accepted his approach and those who rejected it.

**Re'ah**, Rabbi Aharon ha-Levi (Spain, thirteenth century), halakhist whose works include a commentary on the *Halakhot* of *Rif* on *Berakhot*.

**rebbeim**, colloquial Yiddish for teachers in a yeshiva.

**Rema**, Rabbi Moshe Isserles (Poland, 1530–1572), wrote commentary on the *Tur* called *Darkei Moshe*, and notes on Ashkenazic practice that he added to Rabbi Yosef Karo's *Shulhan Arukh* (usually just called *Rema*).

**Retzeh**, blessing in the *Amida*.

**Ri** (France, twelfth century), halakhist often cited by the *tosafot*.

**Rid**, Rabbi Yeshayahu of Trani (Italy, thirteenth century), *tosafist* and exegete.

**Rif**, Rabbi Yitzhak Alfasi (Algeria, 1013–1103). Author of *Sefer ha-Halakhot*, which abridges the Talmud by including only material relevant to the practical halakha and organizes it by drawing statements on like topics together. *Sefer ha-Halakhot* was the most important source for Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*. It is usually simply called "Rif."

**Rishon le-Tziyyon**, official title of the Sephardic Chief Rabbi in the State of Israel.

**rishon** (plural: *rishonim*), an "early" authority, as opposed to the *aharonim*. The period is said to begin when the authority of the *geonim* waned (roughly in the eleventh century). Its close (and the beginning of the "late" era) is roughly demarcated by the end of the fifteenth century, the exile of the Jews from Spain (1492), or the appearance of the *Shulhan Arukh* (1555).

**Ritva**, Rabbi Yom Tov ibn Ishbili (early fourteenth century). Author of commentary on the Talmud (*Hiddushei ha-Ritva*), *Hilkhot Berakhot* (halakhic manual), and *Sefer ha-Zikaron* defending Rambam's views in *Moreh ha-Nevukhim*.

**Roke'ah**, by Rabbi Eliezer of Worms (twelfth to thirteenth centuries); includes the views and customs of the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* on a variety of matters, including repentance.

**Rosh**, Rabbenu Asher (d. 1327). *Rosh's* halakhic decisions are written along with their talmudic basis, following the Talmud's order.

**Rosh Amana**, see Rabbi Don Isaac Abravanel.

**Rosh Hashanah**, talmudic tractate.

**Rosh Hodesh**, first day of the lunar month.

**Ruach**, spirit; in some hasidic writings it specifically means a person's emotional life.

**Saadya Gaon** (882–942). Halakhist, philosopher, biblical exegete, anti-Karaite polemicist, and proponent of the authority of the ancient Babylonian *yeshivot*. His major philosophic work is *Emunot ve-Deot*, and he compiled a systematic halakhic guide to prayer including texts (i.e. a siddur) known as *Siddur Rav Saadya Gaon*.

**Sanhedrin**, talmudic tractate.

**Sanhedrin**, highest rabbinical court.

**Seder Rav `Amram Gaon**, an early geonic siddur by Amram Gaon, which later became very influential among the Ashkenazic Jews in western Europe.

**Sefer Ahava**, second of the fourteen separate "books" in Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*; includes laws of prayer and blessings.

**Sefer ha-Eshkol**, halakhic code including daily laws by Rabbi Avraham Av Beit Din (Provence, 1179; also known as Ra'avad, but not the same as the one who wrote *Hasagot* on the Rambam).

**Sefer ha-Hinnukh**, anonymous book explaining the 613 *mitzvot*, their biblical basis and rationale, and some of their laws.

**Sefer ha-Ikkarim**, see Rabbi Yosef Albo.

**Sefer ha-Mitzvot**, see Rambam.

**Sefer Hasidim**, see Rabbi Yehuda ha-Hasid.

**sefira** (plural: *sefirot*), an individual part of the kabbalistic scheme for describing aspects of God.

**sekhar tefilla**, the reward for praying.

**sekhar tefilla bizmanah**, the reward for praying at the time decreed by Hazal.

**selah lanu**, blessing in the *Amida* asking for forgiveness.

**selikhot**, prayers said during the month (for Sephardim) or weeks (for Ashkenazim) preceding Yom Kippur, including hundreds of *piyyutim*.

**semikha**, rabbinic ordination.

**sha`ah shel hesed**, a rare, opportune moment.

**Sha`arei Teshuva**, see Rabbenu Yonah.

**Shabbat** (plural: *Shabbatot*), the Sabbath (Saturday).

**Shabbat**, talmudic tractate.

**Shadal**, Rabbi Samuel David Luzzato (1800–1865), prolific Italian Jewish scholar. Edited the Italian *Mahzor*.

**shaharit**, the morning prayer.

**shalom bayit**, peace in the household.

**sha`ar**, gate.

**Sha`ar ha-Tefilla**, see Mabit.



**Sha`arei Teshuva**, see Rabbenu Yonah.

**Sha`arei Tziyyon**, see Rabbi Nathan Natta Hannover.

**Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira** (1889-1943), hasidic *rebbe* of Piaseczno and martyr. Author of *Hovat ha-Talmidim*, a hasidic guide for young students.

**shatz**, abbreviation for *sheli'ah tzibbur*.

**Shavuot**, talmudic tractate.

**She'elot u-Teshuvot Tashbetz**, see *Tashbetz*.

**shefa**, overflowing bounty (usually God's).

**she-heheyanu**, blessing recited at a joyful occasion praising God "for keeping us alive . . . to reach this time."

**Shekhina**, God's presence. Also the lowest kabbalistic *sefra*.

**sheli'ah tzibbur** (plural: *shelihei tzibbur*), the "messenger" of the congregation, the person appointed to lead the prayers. Often abbreviated *shatz*.

**Baal Shem Tov** (Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, d. 1760), founder of the hasidic movement.

**Shema** (or: *Shema Yisrael*), first word of the biblical passage which it is a *mitzva* to say morning and evening.

**Shema` Kolenu**, "Hear our voice," first words and informal title of the last petitionary blessing in the *Amida*. This blessing is a general petition for all needs. Same as *Shomea` Tefilla*.

**Shemoneh Esrei**, "the eighteen [blessings]." Another name for the *Amida*.

**shevah**, praise.

**sheva na`**, grammatical symbol indicating a short vowel.

**Shibbolei ha-Leket**, halakhic manual by Rabbi Tzidkiya ben Avraham Anav (Italy, twelfth century).

**Shiltei Gibborim**, commentary on *Rif* by Rabbi Yehoshua Boaz ben Shimon (Italy, 1518-1555).

**shinnui matbea`**, changing the form (of a blessing).

**Shita Mekubetzet**, collection of commentaries by the *rishonim* on the Talmud, compiled by Rabbi Betzalel Ashkenazi (Land of Israel, sixteenth century). It is not clear, however, that the commentary on *Berakhot* bearing the title *Shita Mekubetzet* was actually compiled by Ashkenazi, nor that it correctly bears this title.

**Shomea` Tefilla**, rabbinic title for the blessing *Shema` Kolenu*.

**shomrei mitzvot Hashem**, Jews who keep God's commandments.

**shteiblach**, Yiddish for small hasidic prayer-houses.

**shuckling**, colloquial term for the kind of swaying many Jews do when they pray.

**Shulhan Arukh**, see Rabbi Yosef Karo.

**siddur** (plural: *siddurim*), the "order" (of prayer); a prayer book. Also: a halakhic manual on prayer by the geonim.

**Siddur Beit Ya'akov**, see Rabbi Yaakov Emden.

**Siddur Ishei Yisrael**, see Vilna Gaon.

**Siddur Iyyun Tefilla**, see Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenborg.

**Siddur Olat Re'iyah**, see Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kuk.

**Siddur Otzar ha-Tefillot**, a two-volume collection of commentaries and halakhic guides to the siddur.

**Siddur Rashash**, siddur according to the Lurianic kabbala, by the Yemenite kabbalist Rabbi Shalom Mizrahi Sharabi (d. 1777), who also founded the kabbalistic yeshiva Bet El in Jerusalem.

**Siddur Rav Saadya Gaon**, see Saadya Gaon.

**sifrei musar**, see *musar*.

**Sodot ha-Moreh**, see Rabbi Abraham Abulafia.

**Rabbi Hayyim Soloveitchik** (Rav Hayyim of Brisk), nineteenth century talmudist, author of *Hiddushim* on Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*. The methodology of his *Hiddushim* and other teachings helped form the predominant method of studying the Talmud in most yeshivot to this day.

**Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik** (1903–1993), grandson of Rabbi Hayyim Soloveitchik and senior *rosh yeshiva* at Yeshiva University in New York until his death. He continued to brilliantly apply and develop his grandfather's talmudic method, and in addition contributed a number of important essays to the literature of modern Jewish philosophy. The single greatest teacher of American Orthodox rabbis in the twentieth century.

**Sota**, talmudic tractate.

**Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz**, founder of a major project producing a modern edition of the Talmud with Hebrew translation. Also a highly respected public spokesman on Jewish topics in Israel.

**Sukkah**, a small hut with a temporary roof used on the holiday of *Sukkot*.

**Sulam Beit El**, see Rabbi Yaakov Emden.

**tahanun** (plural: *tahanunim*), a plea for mercy.

**Tahanun**, personal plea for mercy, said while bending over or bowing, after the *Amida*. Nowadays specific psalms and other verses are usually said.

**talmidei hakhamim**, Torah scholars.

**Talmud**, the Mishna and the gemara.

**Talmud Torah**, the mitzva of Torah study.

**Talmud Yerushalmi**, the Mishna with the gemara *Yerushalmi*.

**Tanakh**, the Hebrew Bible (acronym for Torah, *Nevi'im* [Prophets] and *Ketuvim* [Writings]).

**Tanhuma**, early midrash on the Torah.

**tannaim**, rabbinic authorities from the period of the Mishna.

**Tashbetz** (*Teshuvot Rashbetz*), the responsa authored by *Rashbetz*.

**ta'ut**, error.

**Taz**, short for commentary *Turei Zahav* on the *Shulhan Arukh* by Rabbi David ben Samuel Halevi (Poland, 1586–1667).

**tefilla** (plural: *tefillot*), prayer.

**tefilla be-tzibbur**, public prayer, with a group of at least ten Jewish men.

**tefilla bizmanah**, prayer said at its proper (halakhic) time.

**tefilla kifshutah**, simple prayer.

**tefillat ha-musafim**, same as *musaf*.

**tefillat ha-shahar**, rabbinic term for *shaharit*.

**tefillat minha**, the afternoon prayer, same as *minha*.

**tefillat nedava**, voluntary extra prayer by an individual.

**tefillat ne'ila**, the fifth and last prayer on Yom Kippur.

**tefillat reshut**, an optional prayer.

**tehillim**, psalms.

**tehinot**, informal (non-halakhic) prayers for women.

**Terumat ha-Deshen**, collection of responsa by Rabbi Israel Isserlein (d. 1460).

**teshuva**, repentance.

**teshuva** (plural: *teshuvot*), a rabbinic responsum.

**Teshuvot Rabbi Avraham ben ha-Rambam**, responsa by Rabbi Abraham ben ha-Rambam.

**Teshuvot ha-Geonim**, collected responsa by the geonim.

**Teshuvot ha-Rambam**, Rambam's responsa.

**Teshuvot ha-Rashba**, Rashba's responsa.

**Teshuvot Hatam Sofer**, Rabbi Moshe Sofer's responsa (see *Hatam Sofer*).

**Yehuda Ibn Tibbon** (twelfth century), Hebrew translator of numerous works of medieval Jewish philosophy originally written in Judeo-Arabic.

**Tiferet**, a kabbalistic *sefira*.

**Tiklal**, the *nosah* of the Jews of Yemen.

**tikkun** (plural: *tikkunim*), in the kabbala, an act which helps bring the *sefirot* into harmony.

**tirha de-tzibbura**, a burden on the congregation.

**tosafot**, see *ba'alei ha-tosafot*.

**Tosafot Rabbi Yehuda**, a version of *tosafot* (including on *Berakhot*) by Rabbi Yehuda of Paris (1166–1224).

**Tosafot Yom Tov**, see Rabbi Yom Tov Lipmann Heller.

**Tosefta Berakhot**, collection of *baraitot* not included in tractate *Berakhot*.

**Tur**, halakhic code by Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher (thirteenth to fourteenth centuries). The title means "four rows," because the code is divided into four parts. The first part, *Orah Hayyim*, contains the laws of prayer, among other things.

**tzaddik** (plural: *tzaddikim*), a righteous man. Also: a hasidic *rebbe*.

**tze'aka**, "crying out" to God. A biblical term for prayer.

**Tzelah**, see Rabbi Yehezkel Landau.

**tselota**, Talmudic Aramaic for prayer.

**tzibbur**, the congregation or public.

**tzitzit**, fringes attached to a garment in fulfillment of a mitzva.

**tzorekh gavo'ah**, "Necessity of the Upper Realm," kabbalistic definition of prayer.

**tzorkhei tzibbur**, communal needs.

**vatikin**, tannaic phrase honoring righteous men of previous generations.

**Ve-Hu Rahum**, the "long" *Tahanun* said on Mondays and Thursdays.

**ve-tzarikh iyyun**, requires further investigation.

**vidduy**, confession.

**vidduy peh**, insincere confession.

**Vilna Gaon**, Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna (Lithuania, 1720–1797), outstanding halakhist and kabbalist, opponent of *hasidut*. Wrote *Biur ha-Gra* on the

**Shulhan Arukh.** Some editions of the Ashkenazic siddur follow his rulings, the best known being *Siddur Ishei Yisrael*.

**Rabbi Hayyim Vital** (1543–1620), student of Rabbi Isaac Luria who recorded his teachings.

**Ya'avetz**, see Rabbi Yaakov Emden.

**Yabia` Omer**, see Rabbi Ovadia Yosef.

**Yad Peshuta**, contemporary commentary on Rambam's *Mishneh Torah* by Rabbi Nahum Rabinovitch (Maalei Adumim, Israel).

**yahrtzeit**, Yiddish for the anniversary of a death.

**yatza**, fulfilled his obligation.

**Yechidah**, hasidic term for one of the "higher" elements of one's personality, which is not confined to the body.

**Yedid Nefesh**, kabbalistic song sung on Shabbat.

**Rabbi Yehuda ha-Hasid**, the most prominent figure among the *Hasidei Ashkenaz*. *Sefer Hasidim* is attributed to him, though it seems to collect practices and tales from many teachers and traditions.

**Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi**, see Mishna.

**Yerushalmi**, the Talmud with the gemara compiled in the Land of Israel.

**Yerushalmi Berakhot**, talmudic tractate *Berakhot* in the Talmud Yerushalmi.

**yesh `al mi lismokh**, a practice for which halakhic mandate can be found, though it is not approved of by most *posekim*.

**yesh mefareshim**, "some explain . . ."

**yeshiva** (plural: *yeshivot*), traditional school of Torah study (especially for Talmud and halakha).

**Yesod**, a kabbalistic *sefira*.

**Yevamot**, talmudic tractate.

**yihud**, kabbalistic "unification."

**yirat Hashem**, fear or awe of God.

**yirat shamayim**, fear of heaven (like *yirat Hashem*).

**Yisgadal v'yishkadash shmei raboh**, opening words of the *kaddish* prayer using Ashkenazic pronunciation.

**Yishtabah**, concluding blessing of *pesukei de-zimra*.

**Yom Kippur** (also: *Yom ha-Kippurim*), Day of Atonement.

**yom tov sheni shel galuyot**, the extra day of biblical holidays observed by Jews in the Diaspora.

**Rabbi Ovadia Yosef**, former *Rishon le-Tziyyon* and one of the most outstanding *posekim* of the twentieth century. His major collection of responsa is entitled *Yabia` Omer* (currently eight volumes).

**Yotzer ha-Meorot**, the first blessing before *Shema* in the morning.

**Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady** (1747–1813), the “*Alter rebbe*” (first *rebbe*) of the *Habad* (Lubavitcher) *hasidim*. Edited *Nosah ha-Arizal*.

**zilzul kevod shamayim**, a disgrace to the honor of God.

**Zohar**, the central kabbalistic work. Kabbalistic tradition attributes it to Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai (second century), but that attribution has been rejected by a number of rabbinic figures since the book’s appearance in the late thirteenth century, and by academic scholars in modern times. The fierce debate over the *Zohar*’s origin has too often obscured a more fundamental point about it, however: its great importance is not dependant on its date or its authorship, but rather lies in its decisive impact on Jewish thought and history, and on the inherent truth so many have discovered in its ideas.



# *The History and Philosophy of Prayer: An Explanatory Bibliography*

This selective bibliography serves as a guide to further reading, to point readers in the direction of well-written, authoritative secondary literature on the history and philosophy of Jewish prayer. The list contains no references to literature on the issue of *kavvana* for prayer in the halakha, because to the best of my knowledge there is no comprehensive work on that topic. (Chapters one and two of the present volume cite and explain the vast majority of the primary sources the halakha requiring *kavvana* for prayer.)

When it comes to the history and philosophy of prayer, however, there is a wealth of material available. This bibliography lists all of the standard works, as well as a number of other useful articles and chapters in books.

What follows is a selected listing of works dealing with prayer in Jewish history and Jewish thought, with comments interspersed about the particular relevance of some of the works. Whenever a text has been translated into English, only the translation is listed.

## **PART A. BASIC WORKS ON THE HISTORY OF JEWISH PRAYER**

Elbogen's book still remains the standard history of Jewish prayer; see Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*, trans. Raymond P. Scheindlin (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993).

Heinemann's historical form-analysis of talmudic prayer is the standard work on rabbinic prayer. See Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud: Forms and Patterns* (New York: de Gruyter, 1977). Other articles by Heinemann on the history of prayer are collected in *Tyyunei Tefilla* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1981).

For detailed information on the history of individual prayers and synagogue customs, both for daily prayer and the holiday cycles, see

Yissachar Yaakovson, *Netiv Binah* (Tel Aviv: Sinai, 1989), 5 vols. These volumes include thousands of verbatim citations of the primary literature relating to each and every prayer.

A number of classic scholarly essays on the history of Jewish prayer are included in Jakob J. Petuchowsky, ed., *Contributions to the Scientific Study of Jewish Liturgy* (New York: Ktav, 1970).

The latest major work in the field is a well-written, thoughtful, and fascinating book by Stefan C. Reif, *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer: New Perspectives on Jewish Liturgical History* (Cambridge University Press, 1993). This book came to my attention too late for me to include Reif's ideas in the present volume. Some areas relevant to this volume in Reif's book are a summary and update on Jewish liturgical research (pp. 1–21); and discussion on biblical prayer (pp. 22–52); and the development of early prayer and evolution of the prayer book from talmudic prayer (pp. 88–152). Reif's book is a comprehensive history, but has little material on kavvana or philosophy.

## PART B. BOOKS AND ARTICLES ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF PRAYER

### 1. General Introduction to Prayer (in many religions):

The classic introduction to prayer is Freidrich Heiler's *Prayer: A Study in the History and Psychology of Religion*, trans. Samuel McComb and J. Edgar Park (New York: Oxford University Press, reprinted 1958). Heiler's work is especially important for his descriptions of mystical prayer, prayer in prophetic religion, the critique and ideal of prayer in rational philosophy, and the transformation of prayer from a free, spontaneous act to fixed liturgy.

### 2. Popular Introductions to Prayer in Jewish Thought:

Eliezer Berkovitz, *Prayer* (New York: Yeshiva University, 1962). This book can serve well as a basic introduction; it is highly readable, non-technical, and addresses many of the issues we raised in Part II of the present volume.

The best overall introduction devoted to classifying the various approaches to the intellectual problems raised by prayer is the survey article by Shalom Rosenberg, "Tefilla ve-hagut Yehudit—Kivvunim u-Ve'ayot" in Cohn (listed below in #3), pp. 85–130. Rosenberg does not treat any of the individual thinkers in depth, but developed a carefully thought-out framework for understanding them all.

### 3. Collections of Articles on the Philosophy of Jewish Prayer:

*Prayer in Judaism: Continuity and Change*, ed. Gabriel H. Cohn (Jerusalem: Ahva, 1978). (Published for the "Foundation for Judaism and Contemporary Thought," Ramat Gan.) This Hebrew book begins with an introduction by Eli Wiesel, followed by a transcription of an oral forum on "Prayer in our



Day." It continues with articles on prayer in Jewish philosophy (the specific thinkers and areas covered are Halevi, Rambam, Spanish Kabbala, Franz Rosenzweig, and hasidic prayer). It concludes with articles on prayer in modern times (in education, the Israeli army, and new editions of the siddur). *Articles from this volume will be referred to frequently in the following sections.*

*Mahanayim* volume 90 (1960) is entirely devoted to articles on prayer (this is an Israeli Army journal devoted to Jewish studies).

Jakob J. Petuchowsky, ed., *Understanding Jewish Prayer* (New York: Ktav, 1972) contains interesting articles by authors coming from a wide range of perspectives.

#### 4. The Idea of Biblical Prayer:

See Rosenberg's survey article above in #2.

Moshe Greenberg has done excellent work on biblical prayer. See "Tefilla" in *Encyclopedia Mikra'it* 8 (Jerusalem, 1981), cols. 896-922; and *Biblical Prose Prayer as a Window to the Popular Religion of Ancient Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

#### 5. The Idea of Talmudic Prayer:

See Rosenberg's survey article above in #2.

Most of the work on this topic has been done by Joseph Heinemann. Heinemann's *Prayer in the Talmud* (see Part A of this bibliography), though more concerned with history, also has much to say on the conceptual basis of talmudic prayer. In addition, see his *Ha-Tefilla be-Mahshavat Hazal* (Jerusalem: Amanah, 1960); and "Yahid ve-Tzibbur ba-Tefilla" in *Iyyunei Tefilla* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1981).

#### 6. Prayer in Medieval Jewish Philosophy (in chronological order):

Before anything else, read Rosenberg's survey article on prayer in Jewish Thought mentioned above in #2. Information on specific philosophers follows:

For Rabbi Yehuda Halevi see Eliezer Shveid, "Ha-Tefilla be-Mahshavto shel Rabbi Yehuda Halevi" in Cohn, pp. 131-141; Yohanan Silman, *Ben Philosoph le-Navi: Hitpathut Haguto shel Rabbi Yehuda Halevi be-Sefer ha-Kuzari* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan, 1985), pp. 126-129.

For Rambam, see Moshe (Marvin) Fox, "Ha-Tefilla be-Mahshavto shel ha-Rambam" in Cohn, pp. 142-167. For a comprehensive analysis of Rambam's Laws of Prayer, relating his halakhic text to his approach to larger issues, see Yaakov Blidstein, *Ha-Tefilla be-Mishnato ha-Hilkhatit shel ha-Rambam* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1994).

For Rabbi Hasdai Crescas see Symcha Bunem Urbach, *Amudei ha-Mahashava ha-Yisraelit* volume 3 (Jerusalem: Torah Education Department, 1961) on the relevant chapters in Crescas's *Or Hashem*.

For Rabbi Yosef Albo see Symcha Bunem Urbach, *Amudei ha-Mahashava ha-Yisraelit* volume 2 (1955) on the relevant chapters in *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*.

## 7. Kabbalistic Prayer:

See Rosenberg's survey article above in #2.

For well-written introduction, see David R. Blumenthal, *Understanding Jewish Mysticism: A Source Reader* (New York: Ktav, 1978), pp. 146–157 on Zoharic Prayer; pp. 169–180 on Lurianic prayer. Also indispensable on this topic are the relevant parts of Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1941).

On the competition between the themes of "serving" God and "uniting" with God in kabbalistic prayer, see Ephraim Gottlieb, "*Mashma'utah shel ha-Tefilla ba-Kabbala ha-Sefaradit*" in Cohn, pp. 168–189.

An excellent presentation of the important passages on prayer in the *Zohar* is Isaiah Tishby, *Mishnat ha-Zohar*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1982). Tishby's introductions (pp. 184–185, 247–343) are comprehensive works in their own right.

## 8. Hasidic Prayer:

The best introduction by far to this topic is Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer* (London: Littman Library, 1972). Also see Samuel Dresner, "*Ha-Tefilla be-Hasidut*" in Cohn, pp. 261–282. Rosenberg's survey article (above in #2) also has some perceptive comments on hasidic prayer.

For a beautiful, clear introduction to hasidic prayer by a hasidic *rebbe*, see Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, *A Student's Obligation: Advice from the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto*, translated by Micha Odenheimer (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1991), pp. 70–75, 162–168 (also reprinted in the present volume as reading 8).

More well-written material on hasidic prayer can be found in Blumenthal, *ibid.*, volume 2 (1982), pp. 111–160.

On quietism in hasidic prayer, see Rivka Shatz-Uffenheimer, *He-Hasidut ke-Mystika* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1988), chapters six, seven, and ten. Then read Bezalel Naor, "Two Types of Prayer," *Tradition* 25:3 (1991): 26–34, who contrasts quietistic prayer by a major hasidic *rebbe* to the active attention to human needs in prayer demanded by Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik.

On how the earliest hasidim related to the Lurianic *kavvanot* for prayer, see J.G. Weiss, "The Kavvanot of Prayer in Early Hasidism," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 9 (1969): 163–192.

## 9. The "Educational Approach" to Prayer in Modern Times:

See Rosenberg's survey article above in #2.

Ya'akov Tzvi Mecklenborg, *Siddur 'Iyyun Tefilla* (reprinted Jerusalem, 1989), 2a–5b. The preface deals with Rabbi Yosef Albo's philosophy of prayer, showing how it applies to the fixed liturgy of the siddur. The rest of the commentary applied the educational approach to the text of the siddur.

Franz Rosenzweig; Moshe Schwartz, "Ra'yon ha-Tefilla be-"Kokhav ha-Ge'ula" le-Franz Rosenzweig" in Cohn, pp. 190–206.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Al Mahut ha-Tefilla," *Bitzaron* 3 (1941): 346 ff. Reprinted in Heinemann, *Ha-Tefilla be-Mahshavat Hazal* (see above, #5),

#### 10. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kuk:

See Rosenberg's survey article above in #2.

Rav Kuk's commentary on the siddur is *Siddur Olat Re'iyah* (Jerusalem, Mosad Harav Kuk, 1939). The first volume has fascinating introductory essays on the nature and meaning of prayer by Rav Kuk. Other ideas about prayer by Rav Kuk are collected in *Orot ha-Tefilla*, ed. Moshe Tzvi Neriya (Jerusalem, 1988).

An excellent summary of Rav Kuk's views on prayer relating them to his overall philosophy is Chapter five, "The Purpose of Man and Existence" in *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook—Between Rationalism and Mysticism* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1990), pp. 158–170. We briefly presented Ish-Shalom's scheme for understanding Rav Kuk in chapter five of this book.

Also see "Ha-Tefilla be-Mishnato shel ha-Rav Kuk" in *Be-Oro: Iyyunim be-Mishnato shel ha-Rav Kuk* (Jerusalem: Torah Education Department, 1986), pp. 49–64.

#### 11. Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik:

"Redemption, Prayer and Talmud Torah," *Tradition* 17:2 (1982): 55–72. Based mostly on this essay is Shalom Carmy, "Destiny, Freedom, and the Logic of Petition," *Tradition*, 24:2 (1989): 17–37, which is an attempt to apply the Rav's approach to problems encountered in prayer.

"Ra'yonot 'al ha-Tefilla," *Hadarom* 47 (1979): 84–106; reprinted in *Ish ha-Halakha: Galuy ve-Nistar* (Jerusalem: Torah Education Department, 1979).

"Tefillatam Shel Yehudim" in *Ma'yanot* 8: *Tefilla*.

A thoughtful and persuasive critique of the Rav's views on prayer (especially those found in "Ra'yonot") is found in David Hartman, *A Living Covenant: The Innovative Spirit in Traditional Judaism* (New York, 1985), pp. 131–159.

Most of what Rav Soloveitchik said and wrote about prayer is not about its general meaning, but rather halakhic analyses of individual prayers, especially prayers for the holidays. Such essays are scattered among his many writings, and unfortunately cannot be listed here.





## Index

- Aaron, 482  
Abahu, Rabbi, 14  
Abraham, Rabbi, 25–26, 390–391  
Abravanel, Rabbi Don Isaac, 179  
Abudarham, Rabbi David, 275–276, 278, 280, 283  
Adret, Rabbi Shelomo ben Avraham ibn *see* Rashba  
*Aggada* *see* Rabbinic lore  
Ahab, 501–502  
*Akedat Yitzhak*, 49  
Albo, Rabbi Yosef, 100–103, 115–126, 135, 146–147, 179, 181–183, 196, 211, 214, 218, 231–232, 248–250, 486  
    On Prayer, 492–525  
*Amida*, 26, 50–52, 216, 251, 291, 334  
    Original text, 259, 265  
    Repetition by prayer leader, 388–393  
Anthropomorphism, 55–57, 103, 139, 192–193  
Aramah, Rabbi Yitzhak, 49  
Ari, 159–160, 165, 169, 282, 287–289, 292, 350  
Asevilli, Rabbi Yom Tov *see* Ritva  
Asher, Rabbenu *see* Rosh  
Ashi, Rabbi Hiyya bar, 302, 304  
Ashkenazi, Rabbi Yosef, 265  
*Avoda*, 75, 228, 527–533, 538–539  
    God's choice of Israel for, 531–532  
Azaryah, Rabbi Elazar ben, *see* Elazar, Rabbi  
Azulai, Rabbi Hayyim Yosef David *see* Hida  
Babylonian exile, 411  
*Bah*, 302–304  
Bahya, Rabbenu, 4–5, 9, 101, 108–115, 118, 122, 126, 135, 202–203, 214, 232, 238, 286, 427–430, 432–443  
*Bakkasha* *see* Prayers, of petition  
Balaam, 530–532  
*Barukh*, 70–71  
“Be-Inyan Semikhat Geula le-Tefilla,” 200, 208  
Ber, Rabbi Dov, Maggid of Mezritch, 288–289  
*Biblical Prose Prayer as a Window to the Popular Religion of Ancient Israel*, 62  
Binyamin, Abba, 549  
Blessings, 503–508  
    Laying on of hands, 505–506  
    Priestly, 506  
Blidstein, Gerald, 92–95, 97  
Blumenthal, 562, 564–565  
“Book of Principles, The” *see* *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*

- Buchwald, Rabbi Ephraim, 354–355
- Cain, 512
- Carry, Rabbi Shalom, 195–197, 199, 213–216, 221, 250
- Channina, Rabbi, 558
- Christians, early, 327–328, 331
- Commandments, 472–474, 478, 486, 489, 508–509
- Commentary on the Mishna*, 137, 305, 309
- Consciousness
- Multiple, 562
  - Techniques of raising, 563
- Covenant with Israel, 104–105
- Crescas, Rabbi Hasdai, 117, 121, 483, 485–486, 491, 492–493
- David, 522
- Davis, Rabbi Avrohom, 352–353, 355
- Derishah*, 302–304
- "Destiny, Freedom, and the Logic of Petition," 195–196
- Determinism, 91
- Diaspora, 560
- Divine providence (*see also* God, Providence of), 100
- Donin, Rabbi Hayim Halevy, 38–39
- Dosa, Rabbi Hanina ben, 516
- Duran, Rabbi Shimon ben Tzemah *see* Rashbetz
- "Duties of the Heart," *see* *Hovot ha-Levavot*
- Eish Kodesh*, 551
- Elazar, Rabbi, 5–6, 18–19, 249, 251
- Elbogen, Ismar, 260, 404, 406
- Eliezer, Rabbi, 13–14, 23–24, 33–34, 40, 124, 264–266, 337–339, 370–372, 431, 537
- Rule, 18, 20–27, 29–31, 380
- Elijah, 505–506, 516
- Elisha, 505–506, 517
- Emden, Rabbi Ya'akov ben Tzvi *see* Ya'avetz
- Emunah peshuta*, 364–365
- Emunot ve-De'ot*, 423–425
- Epistemological indeterminism, 96–97, 106
- Evil
- Inclination, 112, 181, 438–441
  - Problem of, 244–247, 480–481
- Existentialism
- Religious, 230
- Ezra, 80–81, 279, 308–309, 311, 317–319, 322, 330
- and his court, 305, 307, 345
- Ezra, Rabbi Abraham Ibn, 399–402, 466–467, 521
- Faith
- Aspects of, 537
  - Levels of, 475–476, 479–480
  - Simple *see* *Emunah peshuta*
- Falqira, Rabbi Shem Tov, 483
- Finkelstein, Louis, 259, 261, 264–265, 267, 281, 338
- Fisher, Shlomo, 485
- Fleischer, Ezra, 261, 324–343
- Forgiveness, five conditions for asking, 436–437
- Fox, Marvin, 138, 143–144
- Free will, 119–120, 141
- Gamliel, Rabban, 266, 291, 326, 333–334, 336–339, 342, 388
- Gaon, Vilna, 158, 288, 293
- Ginzburg, Louis, 265, 338–340
- God
- Analogies for, 55–56, 224
  - Attributes applied to, 463–469, 487–489, 494–499, 519–522
  - Duties toward, 108–109
  - Incorporeality of, 462–463
  - In the Bible, 61
  - Knowing by negation, 463
  - Man's obligations to, 427–430
  - Nature of, 120–125
  - Providence of, 480–481, 493–495, 514, 516, 525

- Response to prayer, 486–487, 489  
 Ways to worship, 475–478  
 Gordon, Rabbi Aryeh Leib, 288–289  
 Gospels, 327, 329, 331  
 Greenberg, Moshe, 21–22, 61–68, 70–76, 85, 89, 104, 248, 336, 565  
 Guide to the Perplexed *see* *Moreh ha-Nevukhim*  
  
*Hakhsharat ha-Avrekhim*, 550  
 Halafta, Rabbi Shimon ben, 534  
 Halakha, 412  
 Halakha no. 5, 311–313  
 Halakha no. 6, 313  
 “Halakhic Critique of Soloveitchik’s Approach to Prayer,” 203  
 Halevi, Rabbi Yehuda, 126–137, 146, 149, 232–233, 445–460, 491  
     Definition of *kavanna*, 134  
     Essentialist, 129–130, 133  
 Ha-Levy, Rabbi Aharon *see* Re’ah  
 Halevy, Rabbi Yehuda *see* Halevi, Rabbi Yehuda  
 Hamnuna, Rabbi, 536  
 Ha-Meiri, Rabbi Menahem *see* Meiri  
 Ha-Nasi, Rabbi Yehuda *see* Yehuda, Rabbi  
 Hanina, Rabbi, 19, 272–273, 464, 466, 487, 490, 542  
 Hannanel, Rabbenu, 14–15  
 Hannover, Rabbi Nathan Natta, 299  
 Ha-Pakuli, Shimon, 334  
 Hartman, Rabbi David, 203, 208–209, 212, 217–222  
*Hashkefa*, 363  
*Hasid*  
     Way of life, 130–133, 136, 446–459  
*Hasidei Ashkenaz*, 175, 282  
*Hasidic Prayer*, 164  
  
 Hayyim, Rav of Volozhin, 27–30, 167–170, 174, 283, 285–288, 291  
 Hazal, 5, 16, 26–27, 50, 52, 55, 90–91, 98, 234, 257–258, 294, 311–312, 316, 320–321, 323, 326–327, 330, 348–349, 357, 366, 393  
*Hazzanut*, 396–397  
 Hebrew,  
     Language, 348, 357  
         revived for prayer, 309–310, 345–347, 351  
 He-Hasid, Rabbi Yehuda, 175, 282–283  
 Heiler, Friedrich, 188, 353, 355  
 Heinemann, Joseph, 88, 206, 260–267, 276, 320–321, 324, 326, 333–336, 339–342, 346, 348, 350–351, 357  
 Hida, 290  
*Hilkhot Yesodai ha-Torah*, 472  
 Hirschfeld, Hartwig, 445  
 Hirsch, Rabbi Samson Raphael, 180, 185–187, 222, 238, 365  
 Hiyya, Rabbi, 7–8, 18, 23, 304  
 Hiyya, Rabbi bar Abba *see* Hiyya, Rabbi  
 Hiyya, Rabbi Bun bar, 7–8  
*Hoda’ah* *see* Prayers, of thanks  
 Holiness, 127–129  
 “Holy Fire” *see* *Eish Kodesh*  
*Horeb*, 185  
*House of Aaron*, 554  
*Hovat ha-Talmidim*, 550–551  
*Hovot ha-Levavot*, 4, 108–110, 427–428, 435, 442–443  
 Husik, Isaac, 493  
  
 Isaac, 504, 507  
 Ish-Shalom, Benjamin, 189–190  
 Israel, State of, 410  
 Isserlein, Rabbi Israel ben Petahiah, 19  
 Isserles, Rabbi Moshe *see* Rema  
*Iyyun Tefilla*, 180, 182–184

- Jacobs, Louis, 164–165, 175–176  
 Jewish  
   Scholarship, 62  
 Job, 244, 500–503, 516  
 Josephus, 331  
 Joshua, 518  
 Judaism  
   Orthodox, 349–350  
   Reform, 349–350
- Kabbala, 129, 148, 150–163, 171, 174, 179, 233  
   Lurianic, 166  
*Kabbalat ha-tefilla* *see* Prayer, Acceptance of  
 Kabbalists, 291, 293, 350, 526  
*Kaddish of Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, The*, 252  
 Kafih, Rabbi Yosef, 308–309, 423, 428, 461  
 Kalonymus, Rabbi, 161–163, 176–177, 550–551  
   On Prayer, 550–561  
 Kant, 103, 106  
 Karo, Rabbi Yosef, 30, 295, 301, 303–304, 311, 315, 386
- Kavanna  
   Biblical references, 21–22  
   Conditions for, 414  
   Definitions of, 17, 229, 362–363, 411  
   Difficulty of, 5–6  
   Halakhic demand for, 59  
   Hazzal's concern for, 19  
   Kabbalistic, 165–166  
   Lack of, 6–8, 49–50, 53  
   Nature of, 117  
   Prayer without, 18–20, 22–25, 27, 31–33, 36, 39–41, 108  
   Talmudic requirement for, 16  
   Required in prayer, 20–21, 28
- Ke-darko*, 385–386  
*Kedusha* *see* Holiness  
*Kesef Mishna*, 311, 315, 321  
*Keva*, 12–15, 47, 265–266, 321, 338–340, 342–343, 350, 352–353  
 Kimhi, Rabbi David *see* Radak
- Kohanim*, 489–490  
 Kuk, Rabbi Abraham Isaac, 152, 189–193, 222, 232–233, 291–292, 526  
*Kuzari*, 126–128, 130, 445–446
- Lamm, Norman, 167  
*Laws of Blessings*, 307, 311, 318  
*Laws of Prayer*, 24–25, 147, 319  
*Laws of Repentance*, 147  
*Laws of Shema*, 312, 314  
 Leibowitz, Isaiah, 205, 218  
 Leow, Rabbi Yehuda of Prague *see* Maharal  
 Levi, Rabbi Yehoshua ben, 84, 548, 551  
 Levites, 288–289  
 “Light of the Lord, The,” *see* *Or Hashem*  
 Liturgy, new, 408–409  
 “Lonely Man of Faith, The,” 200, 218  
 Luria, Rabbi Isaac *see* Ari  
 Luzzato, Rabbi Samuel David *see* Shadal
- Maharal, 14, 56–57, 100–101, 294, 401–402, 526–527  
   On Prayer, 526–549  
 Maimonides *see* Rambam
- Man  
   Biblical, 221  
   Description of modern, 209–210  
 Mani, Rabbi, 534  
 Mano'ah, Rabbenu, 386  
 Mar, 373  
 Matnaya, Rabbi, 7–8  
 Mecklenborg, Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi, 180–185, 222  
*Mehaber*, the, *see* Karo, Rabbi Yosef  
 Meiri, 23, 25, 35–36  
 Menasseh, 495–496  
 Men of the Great Assembly, 307, 464–466, 558  
 Meribah, waters of, 514–516  
*Meshekh Hokhma*, 172–173  
 Messiah, 344



- Metsudah Siddur*, 352  
*Mevo ha-She'arim*, 550  
 Milgrom, Jacob, 70  
 Miracles, 517–518  
 Miriam, 482  
*Mishneh Torah*, 137–138, 140, 144,  
 305–306, 316–318, 344, 347  
 Mitzva *see* Commandments  
*Moreh ha-Moreh*, 483  
*Moreh ha-Nevukhim*, 55, 126–127,  
 138–145, 152–153, 461–484,  
 487  
 Moses, 49, 482, 510–519  
 Music in prayer *see* Prayer,  
 Music in  
  
 Nahman, Rabbi Moshe ben *see*  
 Ramban  
 Nahmanidies *see* Ramban  
 Needs, hierarchy of, 216  
*Nefesh*, 555–559  
*Nefesh ha-Hayyim*, 167, 283–284  
 Nehemiah, 308–309  
*Netiv ha-Avoda*, 527–528  
*Netivot Olam*, 527  
 Nissim, Rabbenu *see* Ran  
 North, power of, 546–547  
*Nosah* *see* Prayer, Fixed text  
*Nosah Sefarad*, 292–293, 410  
*Nusach*, 394–396  
  
 Odenheimer, Micha, 551  
*On the Uses of the Parts of the Body*  
*of Man*, 467  
*Or Hashem*, 485–486  
*Orhot Tzaddikim*, 6  
 Osh'aya, Rabbi, 13–14  
  
 Pakuda, Rabbenu Bahya Ibn *see*  
 Bahya, Rabbenu  
 "Paths to Eternity," *see* *Netivot Olam*  
 Patriarchs, 531  
 Instituted prayer, 540–542  
 Pazzi, Rabbi Judah ben, 93–94,  
 97–98  
*Pesukei de-zimra*, 373–376, 379  
 Philo, 331  
 Philosophy  
  
 Rational(ism), 150–151, 153–  
 154, 179, 491  
*Piyyutim* *see* Prayer, Poetry in  
 Plato, 131  
 Poems, liturgical *see* Prayer, Poetry  
 in  
 Prayer, 72  
 Acceptance of, 58, 76, 113–114,  
 123–125, 146, 231, 425–  
 426, 490, 493, 523–525,  
 534–536  
 Anthropological paradox, 197–  
 199, 201–202, 208, 213,  
 216–217, 219–221, 225–  
 226  
 As-sacrifice, 212–213  
 Biblical, 61–62, 65–68, 72–74,  
 76–77, 79–81, 83, 99–100,  
 181, 233, 240–241, 336  
 Blessings in, 121–122 *see also*  
 Blessings  
 Community, 8–9, 58–59, 75,  
 85–89, 112, 114, 122, 134–  
 136, 158, 233–234, 237,  
 299, 326, 328–333, 341,  
 351–352, 396, 419, 455–  
 456, 514, 548  
 Corresponding to daily sacrifices,  
 543–544  
 Cosmological paradox, 91, 99,  
 106, 223, 225  
 Daily, 3, 9–12  
 Decreed by Hazal, 539–540  
 Definitions of, 47, 51, 180–182,  
 185–187, 228  
 Definition of Jewish, 47, 51,  
 53–54  
 Educational, 243  
 Efficacy of, 500, 502–503, 511–  
 514  
 Existential necessity, 201  
 Fixed text, 36, 38, 59, 73, 75,  
 87, 169, 173, 234–235,  
 261–262, 265–298, 303,  
 305–312, 314, 317, 320–  
 325, 332–334, 336–342,  
 348–353, 434  
 Fixed times for, 37, 39, 54, 59,

Prayer (*continued*)

- 75, 85–88, 234, 351–352, 356
- Forbidden, 201–204, 208, 370
- Free *see* Prayers, Extemporaneous
- Futile, 92–96, 98–99
- Genres of, 52–53, 68
- Halakhic, 5, 83
- Halakhic obligation, 78–79, 82–83, 114
- Hasidic, 164–174, 177
- Ideal, 17, 46, 356
- Informal, 172–173, 434–435
- Kabbalistic, 147–164, 223, 239–240, 292, 356, 366
- Kavanna in (*see also* Kavanna), 5
- Lurianic, 160, 165
- Mechanical, 9–10
- Motivation in, 64–68
- Music in, 394–397
- Mystical, 191–192, 229, 231, 238, 241, 243–244, 366–367
- Nature of, 84, 114, 232
- Nietzschean view of, 197
- Non-hasidic, 164–174, 177
- Obligation to, 16–17, 50–51, 84, 87, 333, 356, 473
- Official text *see* Prayer, Fixed text
- Origins of, 326–327, 341, 344–345
- Petitionary, 56–58, 196, 221, 232–233, 248, 250–251, 456
  - Classical paradoxes, 214
- Philosophical paradoxes of, 57, 76–77, 99–102, 104–105, 113, 115, 118, 126, 135–136, 149–150, 159, 189, 194, 213–214, 220, 230–231, 237, 239, 366, 503
- Philosophies of Jewish, 45–46, 356
- Poetry in, 397–408
- Process of, 551
- Purpose of, 133–134, 140, 431, 552–553

- Quantity of, 387–390, 414
- Rabbinic, 58, 70, 77–87, 90–91, 99–100, 112, 149, 219, 233–234, 240–241, 296, 324, 332
- Rational, 101–102, 125–126, 164, 180, 185, 187–189, 196, 214, 223, 229–231, 233, 235, 237–239, 241, 243, 249, 366–367
  - Disadvantages of, 238
- Rational philosophic, 149, 187–188
- Reason for, 141, 146
- Repetition of, 18, 30
- Rote, 5, 9, 12, 21, 39, 79, 351, 354–356
- Saying “like you mean it,” 377–383, 387, 393, 413–414, 421
- Simple, 100, 107, 110–111, 125–126, 150, 174, 177, 189, 193, 197, 199, 220–223, 229–231, 233–238, 242–250, 252–253, 364–367, 414–415
- Social analogy of, 68–72, 75, 85, 89, 99–100, 104–105, 113, 119, 125, 137, 139, 147–150, 188, 197–199, 203, 220, 223–224, 226, 234, 236, 240–242, 246, 248–249, 251–253, 273, 363, 365–366
- Structure of, 17, 64–68, 71, 74–75, 351, 487
- Subjective, 235–237
- Suggestions for, 416–420
- Talmudic, 77, 89
- Theological Paradox, 192–193, 224–225
- Universal balm, 509–510
- Voluntary, 82, 204–205, 298
- Women’s groups, 409–410
- Prayer in the Talmud: Forms and Patterns*, 262
- Prayers
  - Extemporaneous, 63–64, 68, 73–74, 299, 416
  - Forbidden, 221

- Hannah's, 21, 63, 249–251, 536–537  
 Moses's, 64  
 Of petition, 52–53, 56, 58  
 Of praise, 51–53, 55–56  
 Of repentance, 52–55  
 Of thanks, 52–54  
 Pre-ordination, 500–502  
 Psalms, Book of, 62, 64
- Quietism, 191, 210, 229, 231, 366
- Ra'avad, 315, 344  
 "Ra'ayonot al ha-Tefilla," 200–201, 203, 207, 212–213, 218  
 Rabba, 15–16  
 Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook—*Between Rationalism and Mysticism*, 189–190  
 Rabbinic lore, 526–527  
 Rabinovitch, Rabbi Nahum, 317  
 Radak, 63, 71, 181  
 Radbaz, 391–393, 419  
 Rambam, 20, 24–25, 27–28, 55–56, 78–85, 87–88, 90, 120, 126–130, 137–147, 150–152, 232, 266–268, 277–279, 295, 305–325, 332–334, 336, 344–345, 347, 349–350, 355, 357, 388–392, 398, 401, 414, 485, 487, 491, 515, 526–527  
 Non-essentialist, 129–130  
 Views on prayer, 138–146, 461–484  
 Ramban, 78–79, 515  
 Ran, 34–36, 385  
 Rashba, 26, 35–36, 268–269, 274–278, 294, 306, 309, 316, 320, 333  
 Rashbetz, 267–278  
 Rashi, 13–15, 22, 268–270, 278, 295, 373, 537, 546  
 Rav, 6–7, 271–272, 302  
 Rava, 18, 384  
 Rav, The, 48, 194–196, 199–222, 225, 232  
 Re'ah, 14, 23, 294
- "Redemption, Prayer, and Talmud Torah," 200, 209, 213  
 Rema, 30–31  
 Ritva, 35–36, 294  
 Rosenberg, Shalom, 76, 91, 95–99, 187, 192, 197–199, 224–226  
 Rosenblatt, Samuel, 423–424  
 Rosenzweig, Franz, 11  
 Rosh, 24, 398  
 Ruach, 555–559
- Sa'adya Gaon, 76, 308–309, 374, 402, 423, 424–426  
 Sacrifice, 82, 84, 85–87, 140–141, 470–472, 527–533, 544–545  
 Only accepted from Israel, 530–531  
 Scherman, Rabbi Nosson, 282–283  
*Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, 100, 179, 492–493  
 Sefirotic universe, 155–162  
*Sha'ar Heshbon ha-Nefesh*, 430  
 Shabbat, 11–12  
 Shadal, 260  
 Shammai, 13  
 Shapira, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman *see* Kalonymus, Rabbi  
 Shatz-Uffenheimer, Rivka, 166–168  
*Shema*, 26, 48–50, 315  
 Shemuel, 7–8, 271–272, 291  
*Shevah* *see* Prayers, of praise  
 Shim'on, Rabbi, 13  
 Shuckling, 416  
*Shulhan Arukh*, 301, 383, 385  
 Siddur, 46–52, 257–258  
 Text of, 17  
 Versions of, 287, 293, 320  
*Siddur Otzar ha-Tefillot*, 288  
 Simcha, Rabbi Meir of Dvinsk, 172  
 Simla'i, Rabbi, 374  
 Simon, Professor Uriel, 9–11, 53, 372, 396  
 Singing in prayer *see* Prayer, Music in  
 Soloveitchik, Rabbi Hayyim of Brisk *see* Hayyim, Rav  
 Soloveitchik, Rabbi Yosef Dov *see* Rav, The

- Steinzaltz, Rabbi Adin, 183–184,  
361–363, 365, 367  
 “Student’s Obligation, A” *see* *Hovat  
ha- Talmidim*  
 Superlunar powers, 494, 496, 498  
 Synagogue, 548–549
- Tahanun*, 13–15  
 Tam, Rabbenu Yalakov, 269, 278  
*Tefilla* (*see also* Prayer), 71–72  
*Tefilla be-tzibbur see* Prayer, Com-  
 munity  
*Tefillat nedava see* Prayer, voluntary  
*Tefillat reshut see* Prayer, voluntary  
*Tehinot*, 299–300  
*Teshuva see* Prayers, Of repentance  
 Theodicy, 244–246  
 Theodotus inscription, 329–330  
 Tibbon, Yehuda Ibn, 152, 423–  
 424, 428, 445–446, 461–462  
 Tishby, Isaiah, 155, 158  
*To Pray as a Jew*, 38  
 Torah, 242  
   Purpose of public reading, 48  
   Study, 48–49, 183–184, 212  
 Tov, Baal Shem, 165–167, 483  
*Tur*, The, 14, 169, 301–302  
 Twersky, Rabbi Dr. Abraham, 361  
*Tzav ve-Ziruz*, 550–551
- Understanding Jewish Mysticism: A  
 Source Reader*, 562  
 Uziel, Rabbi, 381–382
- Vidduy*, 52–52, 54–55  
 Vital, Rabbi Hayyim, 287, 290
- World to Come, 447, 456–458,  
 537–538
- Ya’avetz, 279–282, 296  
 Yair, Rabbi Phinhas ben, 516  
 Yannai, Rabbi, 93, 244  
 Yehiel, Rabbi, 280, 282  
 Yehoshua, Rabbi ben Levi, 266,  
 272  
 Yehuda, Rabbi, 19, 272–273, 302,  
 304, 309–310, 342  
 Yitzhak, Rabbi Levi of Berditchev,  
 98, 174, 252–253, 559  
 Yohanan, Rabbi, 54, 84, 490, 542  
 Yonah, Rabbenu of Gerona, 15,  
 303–304  
 Yose, Rabbi, 84–85, 95, 292, 305–  
 306, 310, 312, 373, 544  
*Yosef, Beit*, 301–304  
 Yosef, Rabbi Ovadia, 26, 30–31,  
 40, 273, 385  
 Yosef, Rav, 15–16, 92–93
- Zalman, Rabbi Shneur of Liady,  
 293  
 Zamovitch, Rabbi Israel Halevi,  
 428  
 Zeira, Rabbi, 15–16, 18, 207, 348,  
 543  
 Zimet, Jonathan, 395  
 Zimra, Rabbi David Ibn *see* Radbaz  
 Zionist ideology, 410–411  
 Zohar, 155–156, 158, 169, 282

### About the Author

Seth Kadish grew up in Connecticut. He attended Yeshiva University, where he earned his rabbinic ordination, a masters degree in biblical studies, and a second masters degree in Jewish education. He was and remains involved in Zionist youth organizations and in Torah education programs for adults. He taught Jewish studies at a Jewish day school in America until he and his wife Sheri made *aliya* (moved to Israel) from Highland Park, New Jersey in the summer of 1995. He is currently teaching at a public religious high school in Israel as well as teaching adult education classes.

# KAVVANA

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## DIRECTING THE HEART IN JEWISH PRAYER

The issue of praying with *kavvana* (meaning or concentration) as opposed to the "rote" recitation of prayers has been central to the discussion of prayer throughout Jewish history. In this exhaustive study of the topic, Rabbi Seth Kadish gathers and analyzes the wealth of rabbinic teachings and academic studies on the topic of "rote versus meaning" in Jewish prayer. By gathering into one volume all of the material on this important subject, he has enabled Jews who search for solutions to the problem of rote prayer to have a comprehensive resource for answers.

The concept of *kavvana* can be explained as directing one's heart, or having conscious intent, in performing a *mitzvah* (sacred deed). In relation to the *mitzvah* of prayer, *kavvana* can more specifically be understood as sincerity or concentration in one's communication with God. In Judaism, praying with renewed intensity at each of the three daily prayer services is complicated by the liturgy, which is standardized. How can Jews approach each prayer service with vitality and attention, especially when the same words are uttered time after time?

The author assists the reader in recognizing the vast scope of the "rote prayer" problem by illustrating that even the greatest sages have confronted it with limited success. He also reminds the reader to understand the problem, to a certain extent, as a by-

product of our innate human limitations. Most importantly, by bringing together the many possible solutions found in Jewish and scholarly sources, the reader is encouraged to search for solutions that best fit his or her individual needs.

Rabbi Kadish provides a lucid explanation of the rabbinic sources that he has collected and presents them in a format aimed at both new and advanced students of Jewish texts. Scholarly writings of Jewish philosophy and history, as well as many academic works that are not written from a Jewish perspective, are analyzed with equal clarity. The *sidḍur* (prayer book) and individual prayers are explored in order to better understand the messages that are inherent within them. An extensive glossary of important terms and personalities completes the work. *Kavvana: Directing the Heart in Jewish Prayer* is an invaluable reference for anyone interested in exploring prayer on its most intimate level.

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